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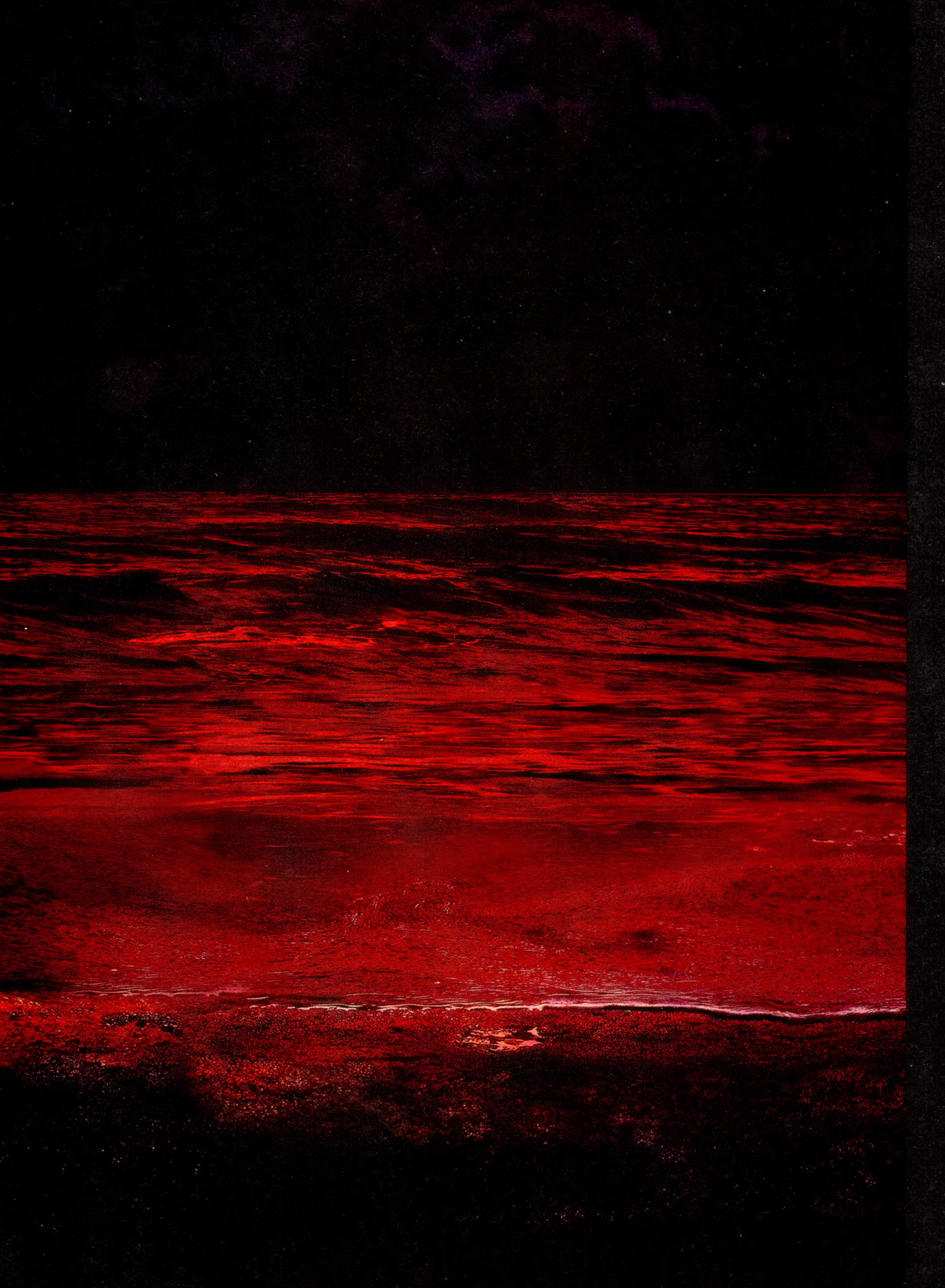

blood II THE CHOSEN

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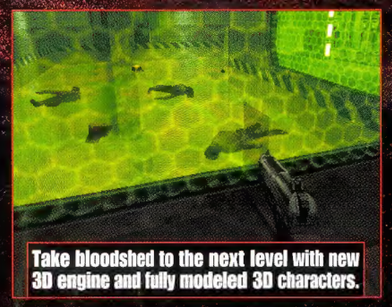

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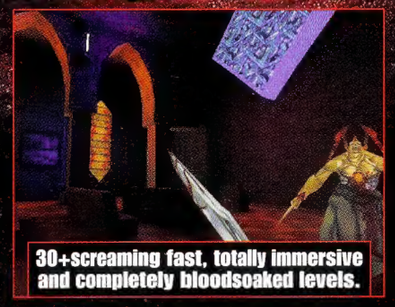

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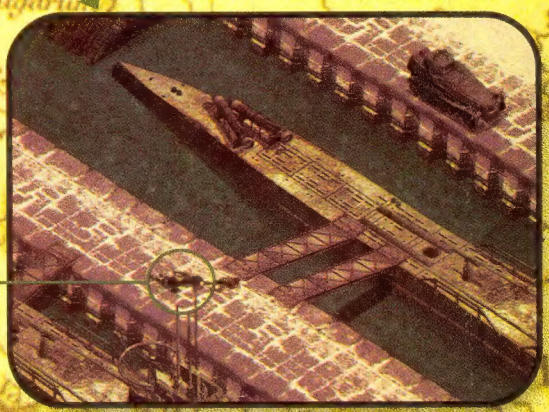

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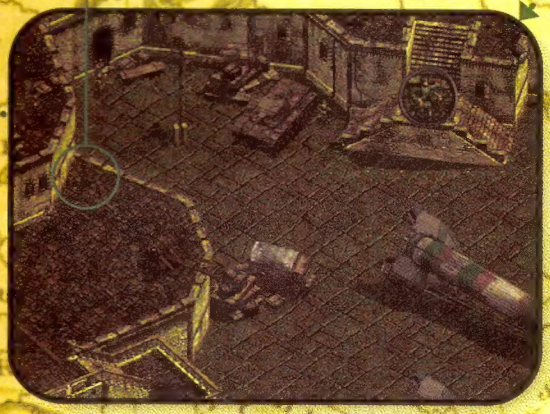

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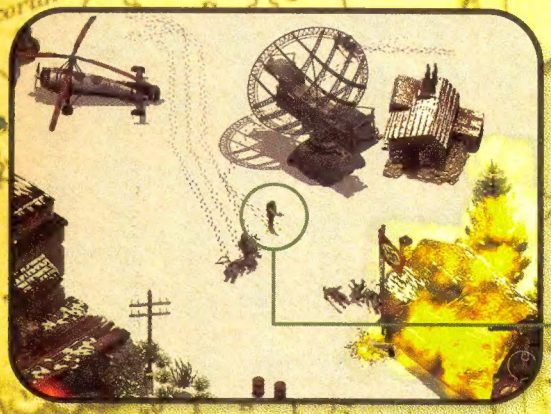

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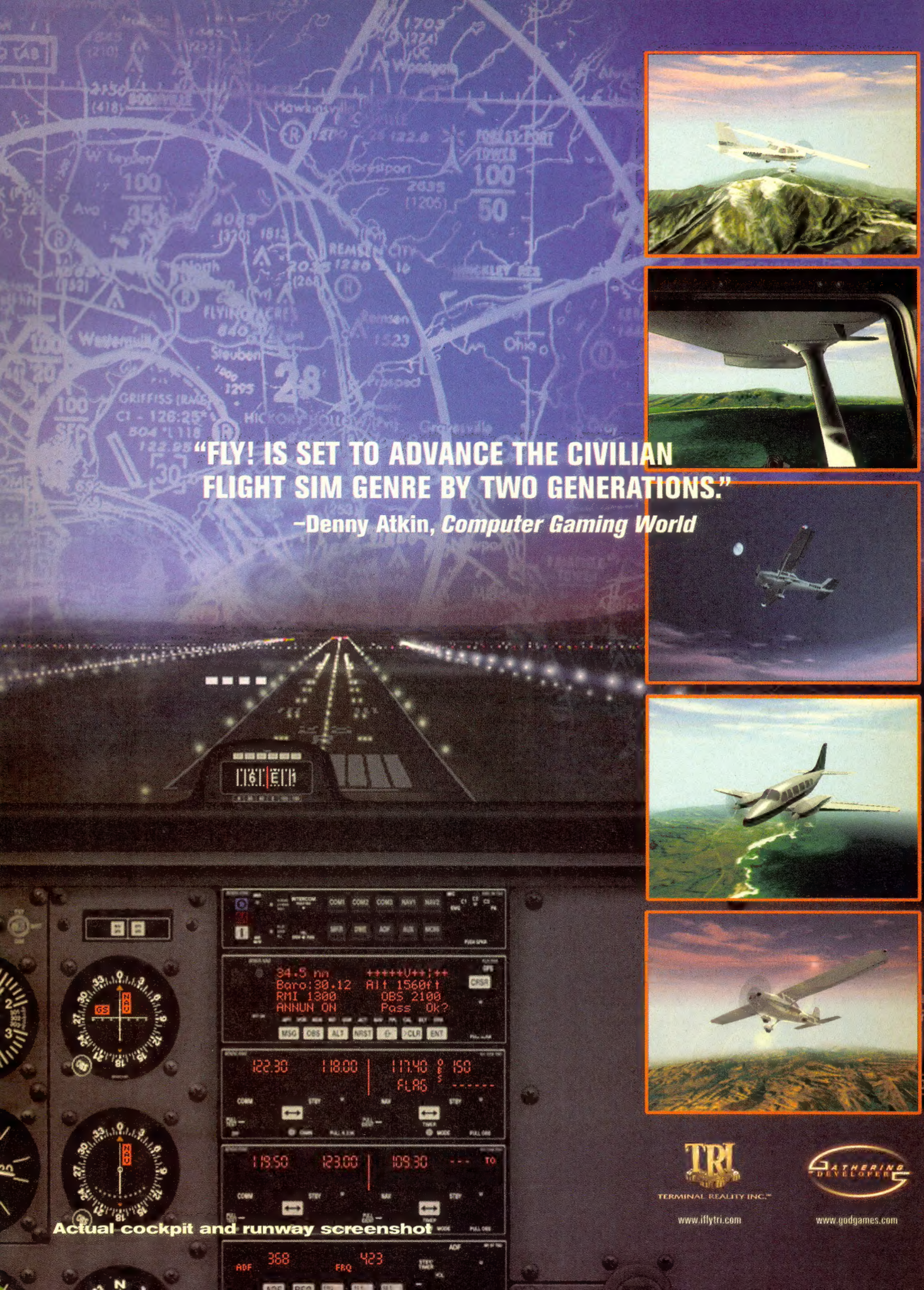
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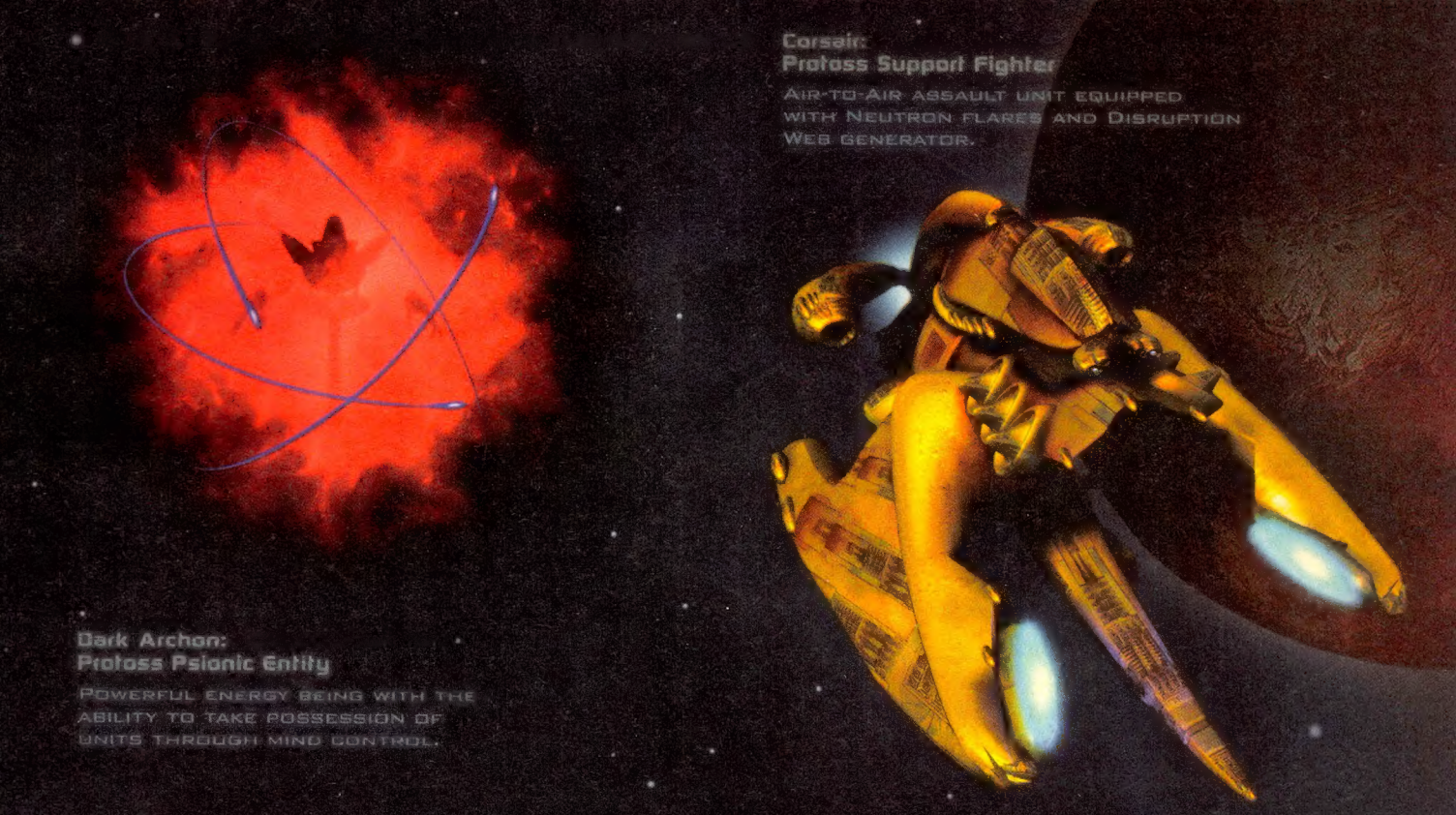
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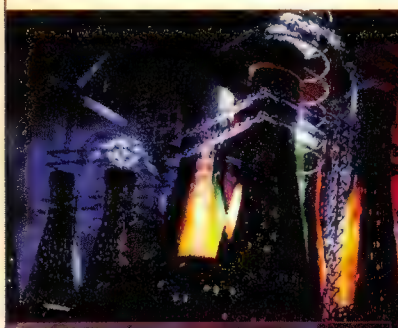

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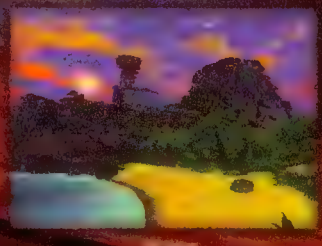

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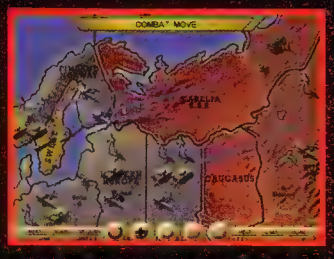

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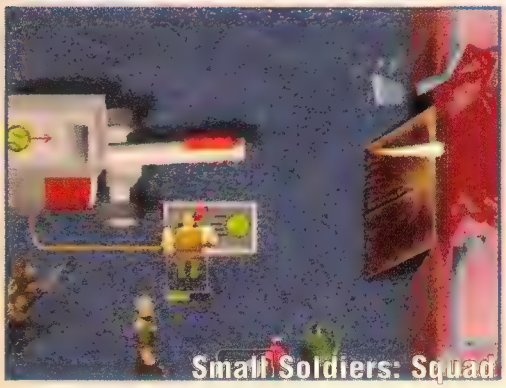
Deathtrap Dungeon

Commandos—European version


Small Soldiers: Squad

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Fast-accurate-often

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FEATURES
What's hot, what's cool

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REVIEWS
The truth and nothing but

DWANGO, Club Connect, Commandos, Deathtrap Dungeon, Vangers, WarGames, Small Soldiers, and heaps more hot games

FORUMS & CHAT
Speak out, speak up

Our readers voice their opinions on 3D cards, Rainbow 6, World War II football games, upgrades and anything else you can think of

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An extensive Might & Magic VI walk-through, in five parts, highlights this month's tips coverage

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Boston Acoustics, KKND2: Krossfire, Panzer Commander, Ares Rising, more!

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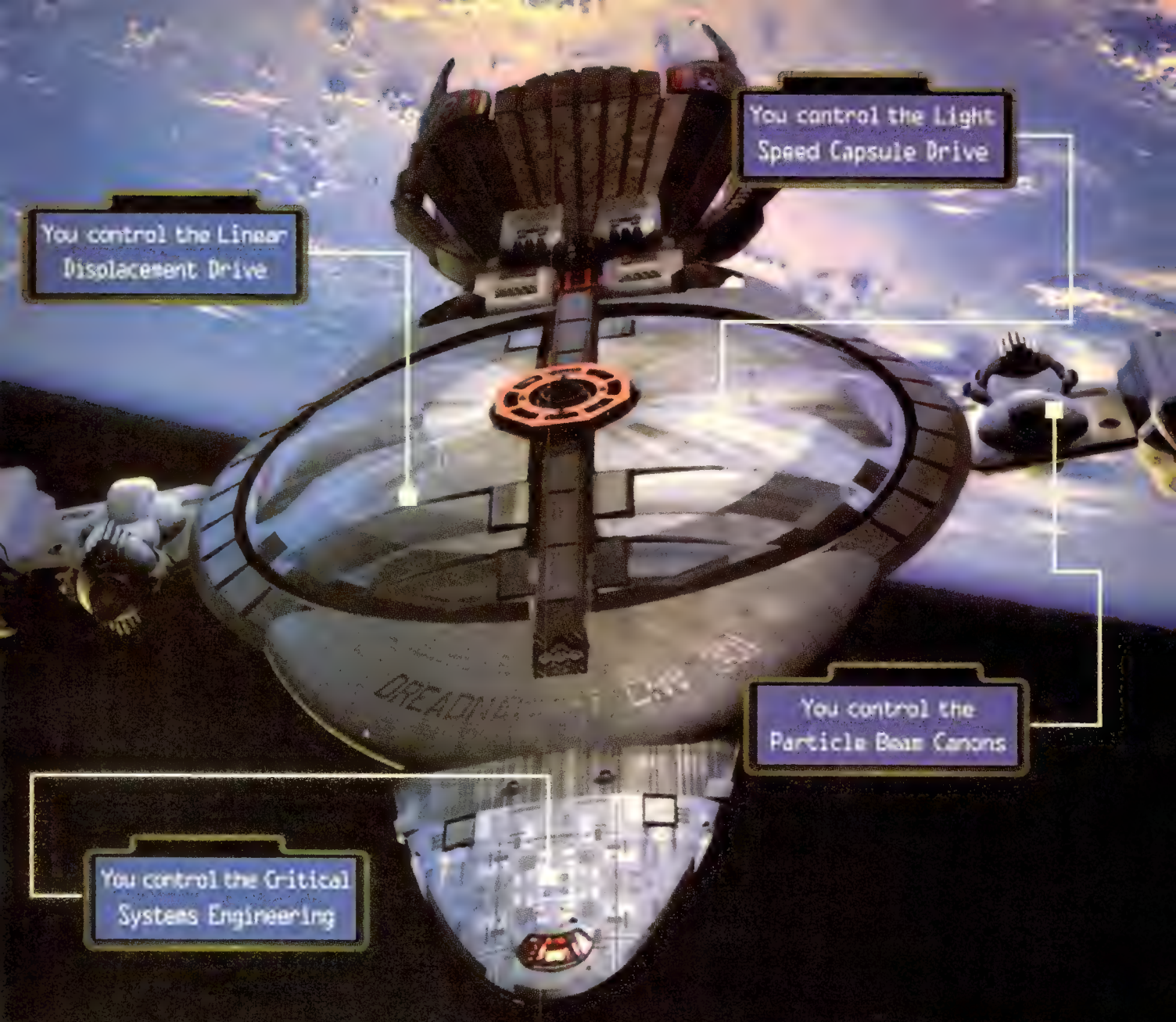
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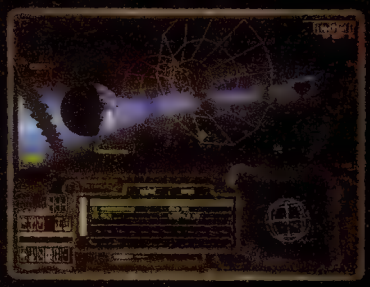

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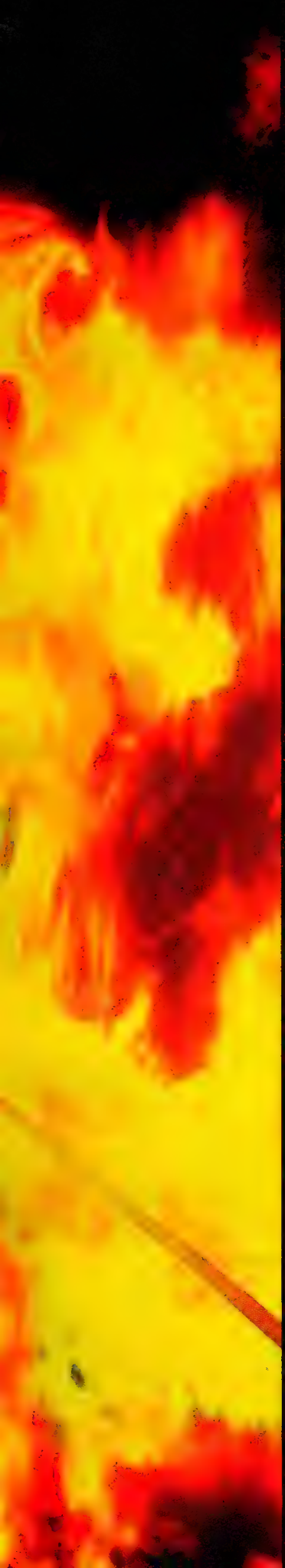

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Getting MAMEd

Rediscovering the essence of gaming by Steve Bauman

During the year's annual lull in new releases, which seems to have expanded from Summer to every month that isn't November or December, I became rather enamored with a program called MAME. This brilliant little program, which stands for Multiple Arcade Machine Emulator, runs over 700 classic old-school coin-operated arcade games. Considering the legality of the program, or lack thereof, I'm not going to detail where it can be found; suffice to say, if you're interested in classic video games, you either already have it or can find it on your own via the Internet.

After spending a couple of months with these games, it would be fallacious to say they're somehow better than their modern counterparts; however, there are lessons to be learned from even the simplest arcade game, something beyond the irrational enjoyment of games as stupid as *Congo Bongo* and *Jungle King*. Realistic physics and a slick trackball controller were the primary draws of *Marble Madness*, and was there a more perfect control scheme than the one in *Robotron*? (One that, unfortunately, can't be easily duplicated outside the arcade.)

What's interesting to note is that old-school arcade games featured simple controls which produced simple actions and results. Jump ahead 15-20 years and we have games with more complex controls that produce… the same simple actions and results. While the technology of gaming has shown astronomical growth, which MAME amply demonstrates, the actual way we play the games has not.

Of all of the games we've seen this year, only Peter Molyneux, founder of Bullfrog and creator of games like *Populous* and *Dungeon Keeper*, spoke of interface design and new ways of playing his upcoming game *Black & White*. His idea for a strategy game interface—eliminate icons and manipulate gameworld items directly to accomplish all tasks—doesn't sound, on paper at least, even remotely revolutionary. It could be confusing, clumsy and/or inconvenient, more of an adversary than an ally to smooth gameplay. However, consider this alternative: by *not* using a stylish icon interface which has evolved from the average word processor, perhaps you'll be more immersed in the virtual world of *Black & White*.

Regardless of the results, at least he's trying. You hear everything about the new 3D technology developed by Company X, but how often do you read about a fantastic new interface, one that is simple, intuitive and logical? We have plenty of innovation in how games are presented—where is the innovation in how we control and interface with the games?

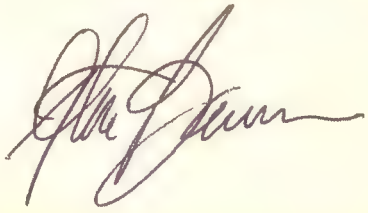
At a keynote panel discussion at the Electronic Entertainment Expo a few months ago, a group of industry heavy-hitters sat around and yammered away about various topics. As befits a trade show presentation, most of the topics were only interesting to people in the industry. Executives spoke in carefully modulated corporate-speak, a language designed around a lot of buzzwords and marketing terms with little substance.

Sid Meier, Chairman of Firaxis, a guy who's knocked out a few good games over the years, including *Civilization*, *Railroad Tycoon*, *Pirates*, and *Gettysburg*, had this to say about the topic of technology. "It's a fallacy that [gaming] is technology-driven," he said. "While 3D graphics cards are important, the key factor is what technology best serves the product and creativity of the game."

While Mr. Meier wasn't necessarily addressing this topic, you can extrapolate that he too feels the essence of gaming isn't 3D acceleration or force-feedback, lens flare or colored lighting. It's an interesting experience presented with a seamless and/or intuitive interface that allows a player to effectively "get lost" in a product for a period of time. Those early arcade games are perfect examples—forced into simple designs by the constraints of technology, the designers developed clever interfaces and gameplay experiences, some of which actually stand the test of time. Game developers need to be encouraged to rediscover this essence of gaming, a simplicity and elegance in interface and design, and innovate in areas beyond technology. You don't necessarily need a new idea—a new interface, or more accurately a new way to interface with a game, would be enough. However, and here's the problem, this interface has to be intuitive enough that it doesn't alienate those of us that don't want to devote our lives to re-learning gaming.

Sound easy? Of course not. If I actually had a brilliant idea along these lines, I'd be making games rather than taking potshots from the cheap seats. But we can hope someone out there isn't trapped merely building a better *Command & Conquer* and is giving serious thought about true next-generation interface and design.

On a completely different note, check out our special feature on the troubles independent developers face getting their games into stores page 60. Would you like to see more features like this? Are there any topics you'd like to see covered? Let us know at editor@cdmag.com.



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Tel: 847-441-6452
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Editorial Offices **2 Millet Street, Unit 2**
Richmond, VT 05477
Tel: 802-434-3060
FAX: 802-434-6493

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I'VE DRIVEN MY VEHICLES LIKE A MANIAC.
AM I DEAD?
I HAVE THE FIERCE AIR FORCE.
I TORCHED A TAERKAST BIPLANE.
I KNOW HOW TO DEFEND MY HOST STATION.
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The future is hear

Real-time voice is the next big thing **by André Vrignaud**

Large-scale online RPGs such as Ultima Online might support text for large group communications and voice for smaller parties such as this

You know what? The more I write about the state of online gaming in this fine medium we call the Internet the more I feel as though we're missing something important. No matter how you slice it, there's still something strangely empty about online gaming. It seems as though the social aspect hasn't taken hold as much as it should. And that lack of sociality seems to have hurt the sense of community that was once expected to be the "killer app" of online gaming.

Think about it. First-person shooters such as *Quake* and *Unreal* are a helluva lot of fun to play competitively, but communication is sadly limited to short, poorly-typed messages sent in the heat of battle while being fragged. Large-scale online RPGs such as *Ultima Online* are far more suited to conversation, but even then you have the problem of trying to comprehend lines of multi-colored text cluttering up the screen, not to mention the relatively slow speed of *typing* to communicate, versus just *saying* it. In the end, I feel disenfranchised, and not at all as involved as I once did. Obviously, something's changed for me… and after thinking on it for a while, I realized what it was: real-time voice communication… or the lack thereof.

When I first started playing multiplayer games, it was always over a LAN of some sort. And the nice thing about having a LAN at your disposal is that everyone is generally in the same building. Going all the way back to *Doom*, I can't tell you how much fun we used to have at SSI when we'd battle each other, yelling over cube walls and speaker phones at one another. Even when I moved to TEN and played over their network (albeit internally) we'd still hurl friendly obscenities at one another, all the while having an absolute blast. There's nothing like hearing the real-time scream of a buddy you just sadistically toasted. But then online gaming became available to the "masses" at home... and it just wasn't the same. I believe one of the reasons online gaming in general (and I include TEN, Mplayer, Kali, the Internet Gaming Zone, etc.) hasn't taken off with the *general* public is that it's still quite off-putting to the casual user. It doesn't *feel* like the traditional social experience we expect—and a lot of that is due to the lack of familiar *talking*.

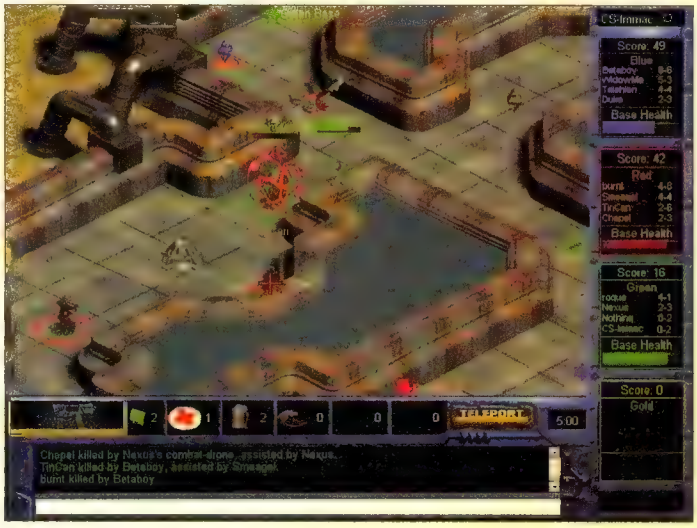
I first started chewing on this when I did a preview of Multitude's *FireTeam* a few issues back [*CGS+ 93*]. *FireTeam*, for those of you who aren't familiar with it, is a squad-level isometric-view action title that supports inter-team voice communication. It does this via a combination of proprietary protocols and a headset (with a microphone) that's included with the title. The end result is quite intriguing—you're able to play with teammates and communicate in real-time, and you definitely feel more of a bond with them. The problems came from the (admittedly beta-code) implementation of the voice support—sound- and voice-mixing issues made it difficult to hear your teammates at times, and needed a bit of ironing out.

Now, the main reason Multitude was having these problems was simply because they were one of the first groups to tackle the issues behind real-time voice support. Instead of just creating a game and using some sort of Windows-native API (Application Programming Interface—and example of which is DirectX) to handle voice, these guys are having to license codecs (basically something that encodes and decodes a signal—examples include MPEG and Indeo), evaluate headsets, write protocols, test it all and then package everything together in a single box. All for a worthy goal, no doubt, but the implementation suffers due to their having to do it all themselves.

I believe we need an industry-wide project to address handling voice communications in games. We need hardware companies to create newer and better headsets and "speaker phone" technology that can be either purchased inexpensively or built into all new computers. Software companies need to leverage off of the work that's already being done on voice over IP and create easy-to-use APIs that game developers can easily implement. And eventually, Microsoft needs to go off and "innovate" (read: buy) these companies and integrate the technology into future releases of DirectX. Hell, at some point the big M could even be selling you the speaker phone hardware.

Once we have the tools, the applications will come. You'll be able to play and talk with your buddies, and actually feel that sense of community that's pitifully weak right now. And I sincerely believe that online gaming will take off and (finally) become the next big thing for more than just the hardcore gamers out there.

What do you think? How interested are you in real-time voice in games? Write us at overthenet@cdmag.com. ■



FireTeam fosters community and team-building via real-time voice communication—just cross your fingers that they'll be able to iron out the bugs!

I DEPLOYED MY GUYS USING THE TRANSPARENT MAP.

I TOLD MY GUYS TO ATTACK FROM BOTH FLANKS.

I KNOW WHERE THE TECH UPGRADE SECTOR IS.

I KNOW WHERE TO PLACE MY HOST STATION.

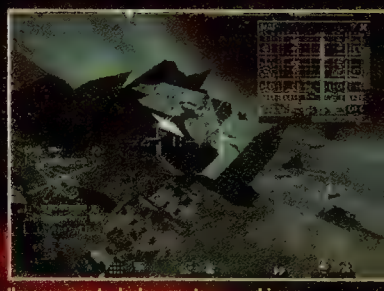
I KNOW WHERE THE POWER STATIONS ARE.

SO WHY AM I STILL DEAD?

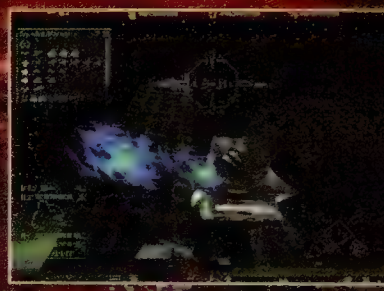
I SAW A MYKONIAN CUBOID FORMATION.

I'M BEING SMART ABOUT MY MOVES.

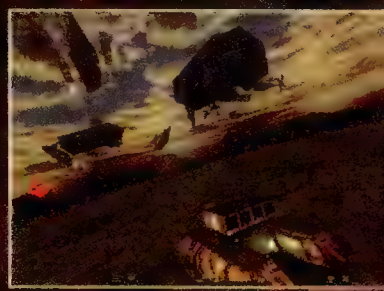
I KNOW WHICH SECTORS ARE SECURE.



Use your map to deploy your troops and jump into any of 15 different types of vehicles.



Create your squadrons and set their level of aggressiveness to defend, attack, or raid.



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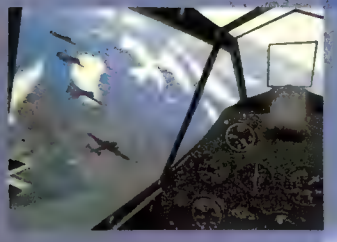

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Avalon Hill, R.I.P.?

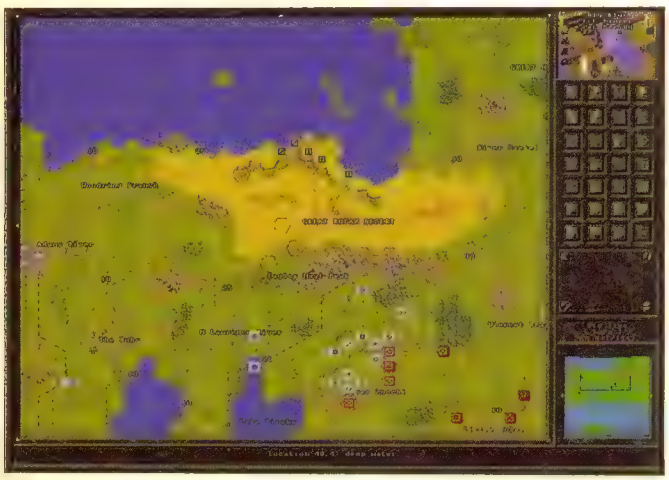
Bought up by a big boy, but what's it mean? by Scott Udell

The news came quite a bit of time ago and while not a complete surprise, it was still, for some reason, a shock—Monarch Avalon has (pending shareholder and SEC approval) sold its games division, The Avalon Hill Game Company, to Hasbro (or, as a press release says, to a new subsidiary of Hasbro). They've also laid off the entire Avalon Hill staff, and will only be selling products out of the warehouse until the sale is finalized, after which it's up to Hasbro to determine the direction of the venerable game company. While Avalon Hill's had rough times lately, especially in the computer game side of things, this specific action caught both its developers and gamers largely unawares.

At this point, we don't know what Hasbro intends to do with the many lines of games Avalon Hill has (representatives at Hasbro Interactive bounced our queries up the corporate ladder, but so far nothing's come back—calls to Wayne Charness, their VP of Corporate Communication, have gone un-returned), but the firing of Avalon Hill staff seems ominous. Jim Rose, who formerly headed Avalon Hill's computer game efforts but who left to found and head TalonSoft, believes that Hasbro is largely interested in Avalon Hill's line of family board games, games like *Acquire* and perhaps *1830*. Even he, however, has no guess as to what they'll do with Avalon Hill's more than thirty year-old line of war and strategy games, games that are for the most part harder-core than anything Hasbro's ever published. The big fear is that Hasbro will just hang on to the designs, not printing new runs, releasing any follow-on products, nor developing any entirely new games (especially worrisome with the firing of the staff)—basically just burying them so no one can do anything with them.

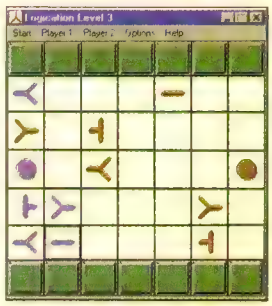
But what does this mean to the computer gamer? Well, first off, there were the computer games in development, if indeed there were any left after Big Time Software split away, thereby killing the current *Squad Leader* effort. (Note: Avalon Hill did officially have several other games on the books, but had shown no more than a couple of screenshots, so it's hard to say where those games were; Hasbro Interactive did tell us they weren't told of any games they'd be getting from the deal, but that's not conclusive evidence that the games are dead.) Even more important is that the burying of Avalon Hill's wargames designs would kill off a rich source of ready-made titles ripe for computer conversion. True, many of the designs are classic hex-based, turn-based games, but that doesn't mean they wouldn't make good computer games (far from it!), either directly translated or modified for computer play. In many cases these games have been through multiple editions, and the designs have been thoroughly "debugged," so are wanting only a good development team to move them to computer (Hah! He says "only"—as Avalon Hill learned, getting a development team together is not easy). Nevertheless, let us hope that, if they don't do something with the designs themselves, Hasbro either sells them to others or licenses them, be they for full games, as officially-sanctioned add-ons for things like HPS's *Aide de Camp 2.0* play-by-e-mail utility, or as source material for scenarios in games like TalonSoft's *The Operational Art of War*. Indeed, if you look around the 'net you'll likely find a number of quasi-official or totally unofficial user-created support products—things like utilities to aid the playing of *Advanced Squad Leader*, or even shareware computer versions of some games (I've seen *Rail Baron* and a simple *Panzer Blitz*).

Big Blue begins its advance in this more direct Blitzkrieg translation by Wendell Martin



Avalon Hill's Blitzkrieg boardgame served as the inspiration for this Operational Art of War scenario by John Kelly (the scenario can be found on www.thegamers.net/toaw/scenarios.htm; note that Mr. Kelly has expanded on the original AH design)

Switching subjects from hard-core wargames to "Sons of *Solitaire*," here's something for the folks who've spent hours with the simple little games that came with windows (*Solitaire*, *Minesweeper*, etc.). Called *Logication* (published by Brain Block Interactive, 559 W. Diversey Parkway #106, Chicago, IL 60614, www.brainblock.com), it feels vaguely like chess, only simpler. The goal is to capture your opponent's "Logicator," a fixed spot on the board. You're given a number of pieces, each of which can only move in specific directions indicated by the lines of the piece (for example, a "Y" shaped piece could move diagonally left or right going up, but only vertically going down, and couldn't move directly to either side at all). The registered version of the game comes with several dozen different board layouts and three levels of AI opponents (much improved over and faster than those in version 1.0 of the game); a planned version will add Internet play and a board editor, amongst other items. The game may not be the next *Civilization*, but it's one of those "simple-yet-addictive" little packages for when you've got just a few minutes to burn. ■



Logication—very simple and surprisingly addictive; can't wait for a multiplayer version

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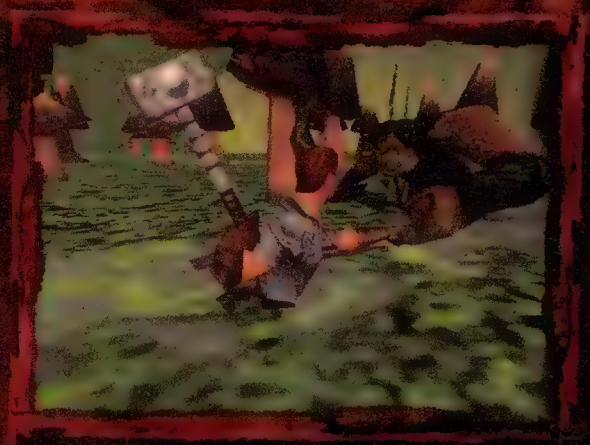

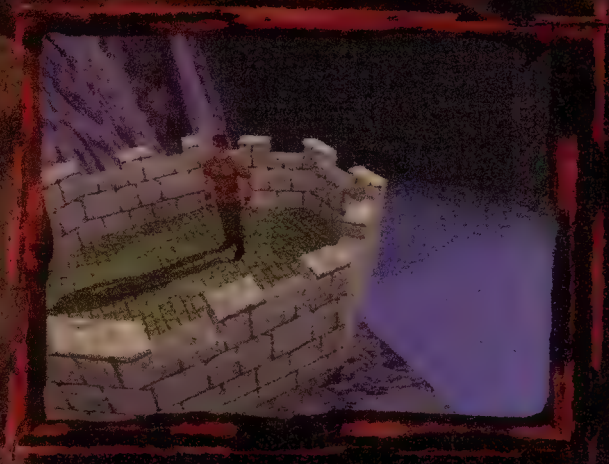

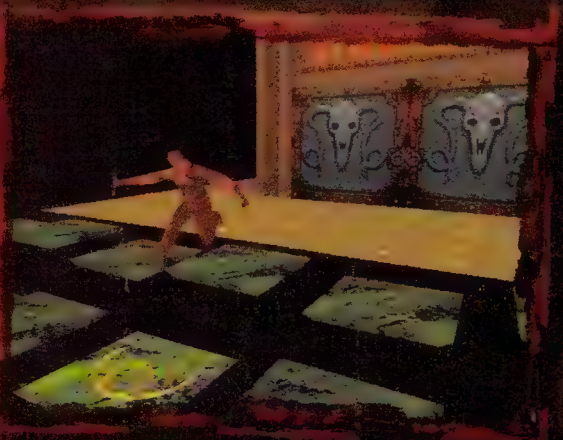

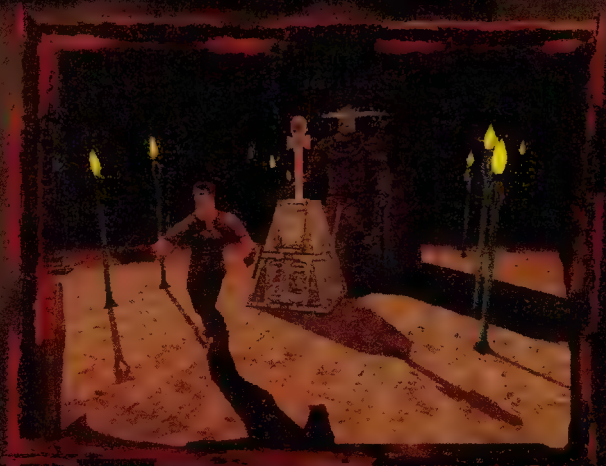

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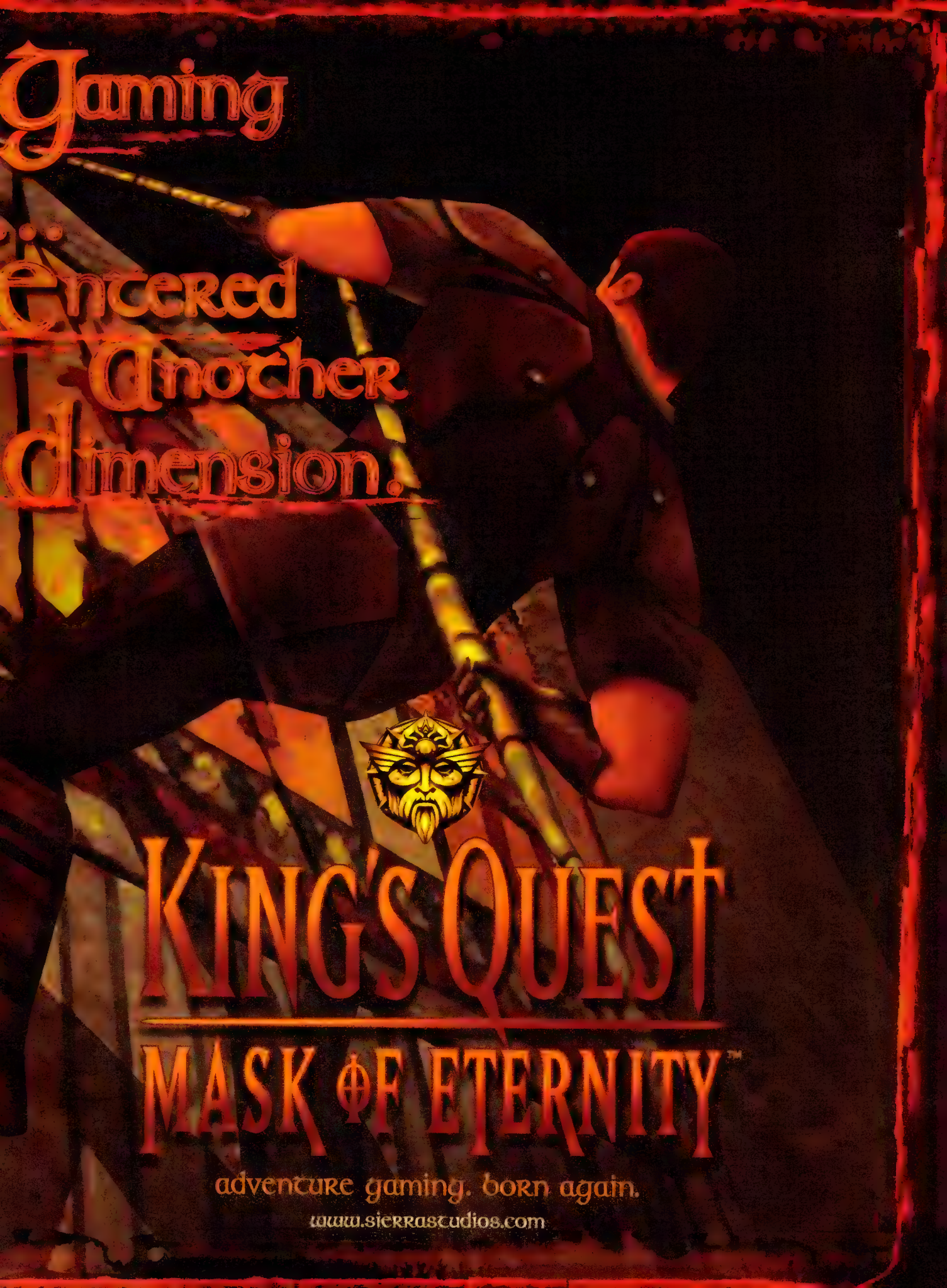
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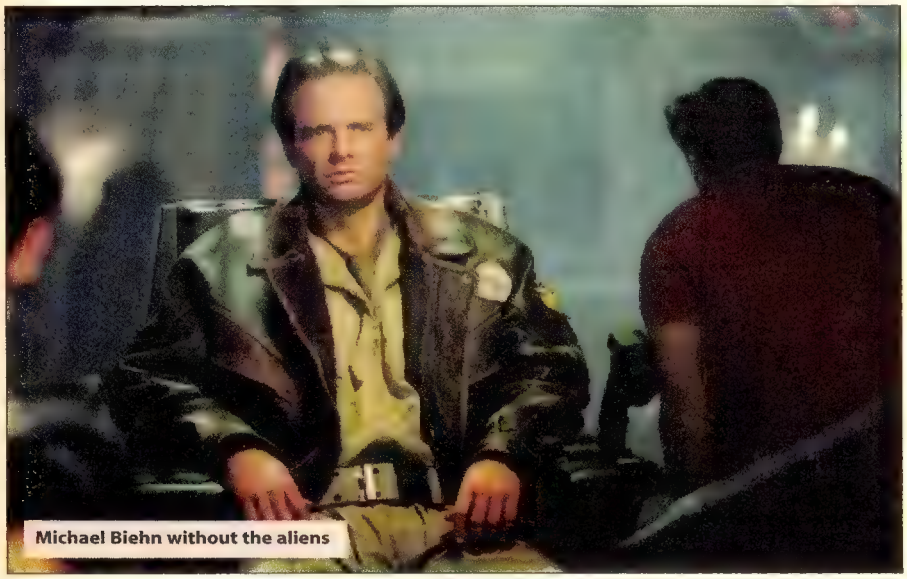
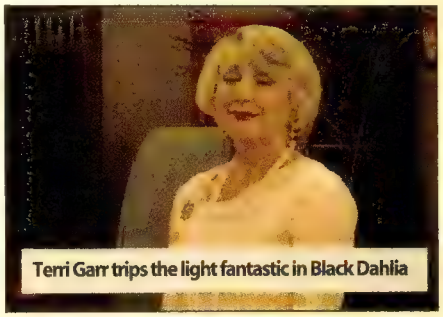
Faces and voices of note

"Who am I, anyway? Am I my résumé?"–A Chorus Line By Cindy Yans



Michael Biehn without the aliens



Terri Garr trips the light fantastic in Black Dahlia

A general look at James Earl Jones

Burgess Meredith, torturous in Ripper

Karen Allen as Dr. Clare Burton in Ripper

It happened in early August. There amidst the batches of press releases was an item from Westwood Studios announcing that "world-renowned actors James Earl Jones (*Star Wars, Field of Dreams, Hunt For Red October*) and Michael Biehn (*The Terminator; Aliens, The Rock*) will be contributing their talents to Westwood's upcoming CD-ROM game *Command & Conquer: Tiberian Sun*." Gulp. James Earl Jones… James Earl Jones in a computer game. After a moment of silence, I continued the day feeling as though the career of one of my major heroes—a person regarded by many as a legend—had been, well, somewhat tarnished. In addition to those mentioned above, his countless performances include appearances in *The Great White Hope, Cry the Beloved Country, Patriot Games, Naked Gun 33 1/3: The Final Insult* (well, he can't *always* be swathed in dignity).

When it comes right down to it, though, a lot of actors have graced our industry with their acting and voice talent. Who can forget (much as you might like to in a few cases) any of the following: Burgess Meredith as Hamilton Wofford/Covington Wofford in *Ripper*; Brian Keith in *Under a Killing Moon*; the almost-ubiquitous John Rhys-Davies in *Wing Commander, Gabriel Knight* and *Ripper* (Rhys-Davies is also appearing in *Dune 2000*); Gary Coleman as Kenny Falmouth in *The Curse of Monkey Island*; William Shatner in *TekWar*; Mark Hamill and Malcolm McDowell in *Wing Commander*, Lolita Davidovich sitting on the shoulder of Ron-Perlman-on-tranquilizers in Roger Zelazny's *Chronomaster*; Patrick Stewart as King Richard in *Lands of Lore: The Throne of Chaos*; Gillian Anderson and David Duchovny in, er…hmm… what was that again? Tim Curry in *Gabriel Knight* and *Frankenstein*; The cast of *Star Trek* in, well, *Star Trek* games including Michael Dorn's more-than-cameo in *Star Trek: The Next Generation*; Tanya Roberts in *The Pandora Directive*; Rip Taylor, a true highlight as the soldier in *Zork Grand Inquisitor*; Dennis Hopper in *Hell* (and it was) and *Black Dahlia*; Terri Garr, also in *Black Dahlia*; Comedian Jimmie Walker in *Ripper*; Karen Allen as Dr. Clare Burton, also in *Ripper*; and in what has to be the most memorable performance in an full motion video game (which, just in case you're wondering, is by no means meant in a good way), Christopher Walken as Detective Magnotta in *Ripper*. Although Walken redeemed himself somewhat in as David Hassan in *Privateer 2*, the Magnotta performance is truly unforgettable.

At what price glory? And is it, in fact, a matter of price? Do actors choose to do computer games because they cannot find other work? Certainly this cannot be true in Jones' case. But what about Jimmie Walker, who has been known to hawk for Pizza Hut, or the late beloved Burgess Meredith, who has been seen blissfully sipping Carnation Instant Cocoa? Did *Ripper* seem like that stellar an opportunity? There are, after all, quite a few *Ripper* credits cited. Do household-word actors sit around saying, "Gee, I'd sure like to appear in the next Tex Murphy game. I'd better call my agent"? Possibly computer games are a step up from commercials, but I would imagine them to be a step down from feature films or even, gasp, sitcoms.

If you search mainstream online biographical information and lists of credits for these actors, only a small handful offer so much as a mention of their work in computer games. Possibly this is because computer gaming is not mainstream—at least not yet. Is it possible, though, that these appearances and voice work are best swept under the résumé carpet?

Westwood Studios offers the following explanation for Jones' agreement to appear in *Tiberian Sun*: His kids all played *Command & Conquer* and cajoled him into doing it. The same is supposedly true for Biehn. I really want to accept this explanation. It hurts far less than the notion that the golden-voiced giant somehow took a step downward. And hey, with the likes of James Earl Jones gracing an already-established game franchise… perhaps that elevates all of us. ■

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*September Issue of Computer Gaming World. Top 100 Chart

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It's a game! It's a sim!

How to determine the difference **by Ben Chiu**

The release of NovaLogic's *Comanche Gold* and the recent announcement of Jane's Combat Simulations' *Longbow Anthology* (a compilation of *Longbow Gold* and *Longbow 2*) reminded us of one of those poignant arguments that, on the surface, may be just splitting hairs. To an outsider the debate on whether a product's a simulation or a game is rather silly—they're *all* games, really. Nevertheless, these two franchises are two good examples of what today are generally acknowledged as a "game" (*Comanche*) and a true "sim" (*Longbow*).

What exactly is it that sets a sim apart from a game? The answer not only depends on whom you ask, but also on when you may have asked that question. Years ago, the most obvious determining factor was in a product's flight modeling. Kesmai's ever-popular Gary Cooper (in his own words "not the dead one") summed up the then prevailing sentiment once by stating, "Any product (flight/computer oriented) that considers Angle of Attack (AOA) in an at least semi-realistic way is a sim, any other a game."

Today, even the most rudimentary flight simulations model AOA to some extent. Even so, since we're talking about helicopters here, AOA modeling alone probably isn't appropriate to use as the sole determining factor. Weighing overall flight modeling might suffice in this regard, and there's no question that *Longbow 2* wins here. However, to be fair, *Comanche Gold*'s control application requirements in some instances are superior to *Longbow 2*'s. (One example: Returning the cyclic stick to neutral while in a turn will almost immediately reduce the bank or even enter level flight in a real helicopter.) So how "right" does a flight model have to be to differentiate a sim from a game?

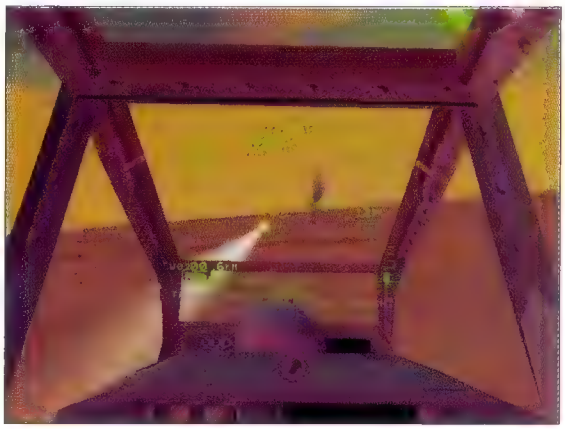
Of course there's no such thing as a flight model rating system (just the thought brings chills), and as we've discussed over the last few months, flight modeling and realism are difficult (if not impossible) to quantify precisely. So does the level of realism tell the whole story?

At one point not too long ago, you could pretty much figure out what was a sim and what was a game just by looking at the graphics. Before the 3D graphics card, eye-popping graphics were a giveaway that you were looking at a game. Again, things have changed. What seems to be more important than realistic looking landscapes are accurate terrain dimensions and features. Still, do simulation features like a mission planner, or a lack of thereof, have any bearing on a product's category?

Let's say we overlooked *Comanche Gold*'s pitch and bank limitations, added real world terrain data, and turned off the "TARGETS" display on the HUD. Add a mission editor (which was done), and reduce the overly optimistic mission goals (a campaign created by the former Training and Doctrine Liaison to Boeing/Sikorsky Helicopter, Major Allen Sakcriska, was also added). Would we have a sim yet?

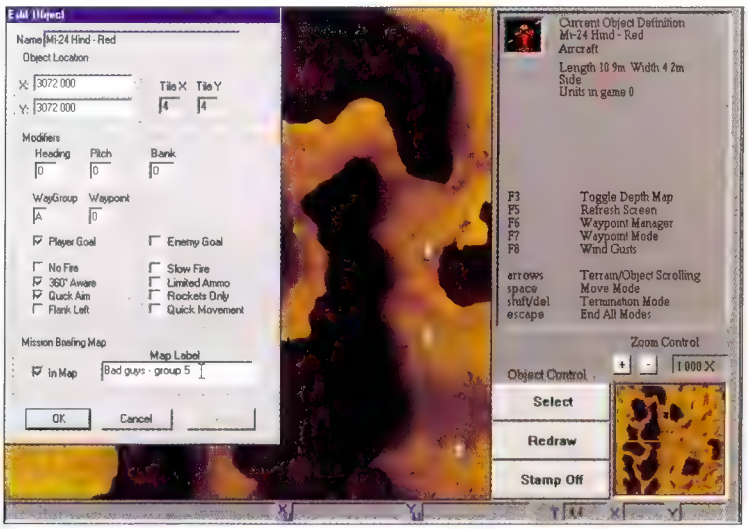
On a more esoteric level, the biggest difference between these two product categories is that a sim is more procedure oriented. Flying requires both physical and mental operations. Although training strives to increase a pilots' familiarization with their aircraft so they can perform their duties almost by instinct or reflex, games rely on reaction more than mental processes. Once again, the acceptable level of minimum internal cockpit workload has changed over the years, and as advanced systems work their way into combat aircraft, it'll be reduced even more, further blurring the "distinction" between a sim and a game—wherever that is.

In the end, the factors that determine the classification of a game is a combination of realism features, gameplay goals and the type and level of cockpit workload. But after all is said and done, the question that begs to be asked is whether it even matters? In a free-market, where votes are cast with one's wallet, games have won. But a major factor seems to be the product's entertainment value—whether it's a sim or a game doesn't matter as long as its fun, and that can be found in either type of game. ■



Longbow 2, the undisputed King of Helicopter "Sims"

Comanche Gold's mission editor



Is the new campaign by a former Training and Doctrine Liaison to Boeing/Sikorsky a step to sim-dom?

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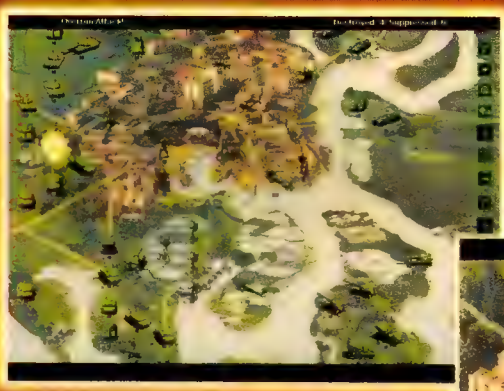

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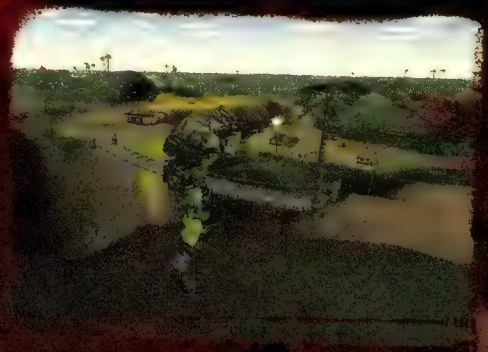

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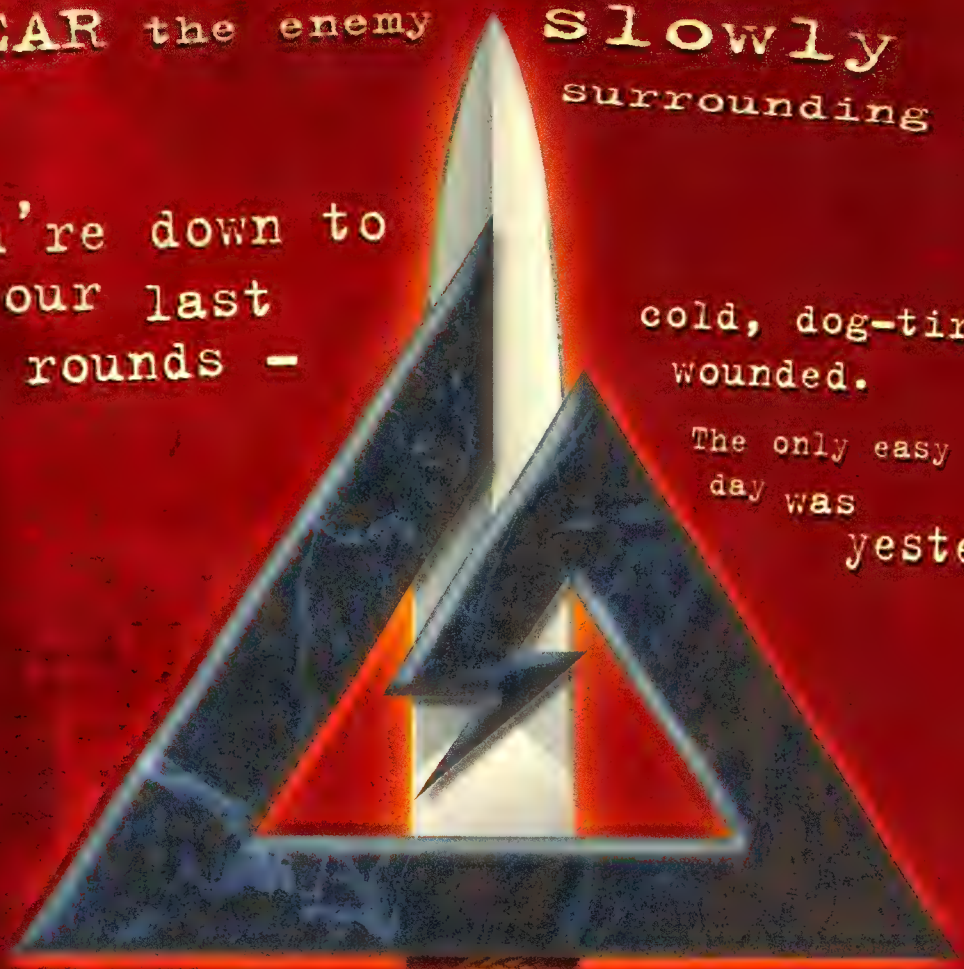

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CG-CDROM

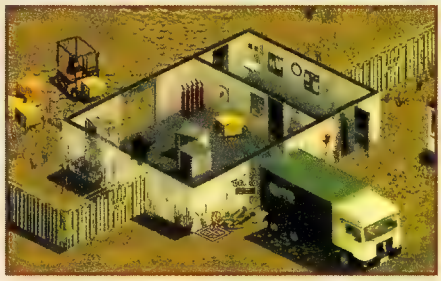
NO. 96 / DEMOS / KEYBOARD CONROLS / REQUIREMENTS

The original *Jagged Alliance* had a cult following, and was one of the highest-regarded turn-based tactical combat games ever released. Now Sirtech has upped the ante, combining a dash of real-time pacing, loads of turn-based tactical warfare, and a distinct RPG feel in *Jagged Alliance 2*.

In this demo you'll control five different mercenaries in real-time as you explore your surroundings. However, the action switches to turn-based as soon as you encounter danger, or any kind of interaction with non-player-characters.

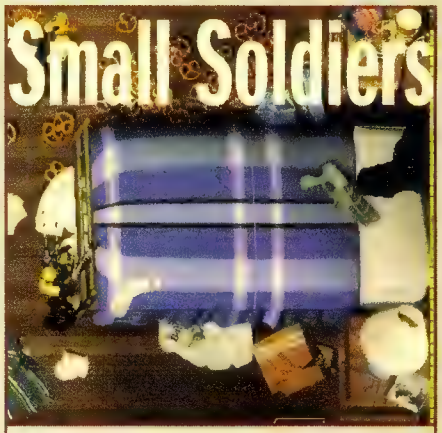
This demo is only one mission, but it's lengthy, and will give you a good chance check out the many features of *Jagged Alliance 2*.

Windows 95, 133MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB RAM
Sirtech • www.sir-tech.com



KEYBOARD CONTROLS

shift	Movement mode
control	Hand cursor
esc	Aborts action
Pause	Pauses the game
alt	Backwards
enter	Cycles between enemies
tab	Changes cursor level
F1 – F6	Selects/Locates mercs
Space Bar	Selects next merc in squad
B	Burst mode for guns
~	Team and inventory panels
N	Cycles between targets
X	Exchanges places with merc
R	Run
S	Stand
C	Crouch
P	Prone
L	Look
I	Sector map
O	Options screen
alt S	Quick save
alt L	Quick load
M	Map screen
W	Wireframes
T	Treetops



Along with the release of the movie *Small Soldiers* this summer, Hasbro Interactive has released a real-time strategy game based on the movie, called *Small Soldiers: Squad Commander*. Aimed at a younger audience, it focuses more on the combat and action of the genre instead of the resource management and strategic commanding.

The demo allows you to play one mission from either side, the Gorgonites or the Commandos. The Gorgonites must seek out a computer in the house, and turn it on, while the Commandos must find a telephone and disable it—all of this as they toss firecrackers and try to slam doors on one another.

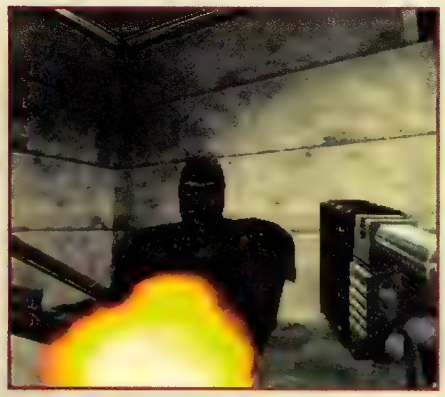
Windows 95, 100MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB of RAM
Hasbro Interactive • www.hasbro-interactive.com

Sin is one of the many, many first person shooters that are in the pipeline for release during the latter part of this year. It's based on a modified version of the *Quake II* engine. You play Blade (or whatever you decide to name yourself), a city cop bent on fighting crime.

In this demo, you'll have to storm a bank and rescue hostages. First, you'll fly in on a helicopter, and take out the enemies on the roof using the helo's door-mounted machinegun. Then you'll infiltrate the bank itself, and take them on face-to-face.

Sin has a high-level of interactivity, allowing you to pick up weapons and ammo from fallen foes. Also, it matters where you actually shoot the enemies—one good shot to the head and they're history.

Windows 95, 133MHz Pentium or higher, 32MB RAM
Activision • www.activision.com



Urban Assault

Urban Assault is one of many upcoming real-time strategy titles that not only utilizes resource management, but also combines first-person action with its strategy elements. *Urban Assault* allows you to jump into, and control, the tanks and helicopters that you create, giving them an edge in battle. You're able to create more complex units by capturing technology from your enemies.

This demo starts you out slowly, giving you three training missions to bring you up to speed on the many options and features of the game before giving you a full blown mission and map to conquer.

Windows 95, 133 MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB RAM
Microsoft • www.microsoft.com
Technical Support: 425-637-9308

KEYBOARD CONTROLS

W	Walk forward
S	Walk backwards
A	Strafe left (sidestep left)
D	Strafe right (sidestep right)
C	Crouch
U	Use
Space Bar	Jump
enter	Use Inventory Item
[	Previous Inventory Item
]	Next Inventory Item
Mouse	Fire
Mouse	Strafe
/	Next weapon
F1	Mission Status
F2	Inventory

CGCDROM INSTALLATION INSTRUCTIONS

Windows 95
Place the CD disc in your CD-ROM drive. The disc will autoplay. If it fails to do so, right click on your CD-ROM icon (located in "My Computer") and select OPEN. Double-click the "Install" icon.

Windows 3.1
Place the CD in your CD-ROM drive and choose File, Run from the Program Manager. Type "D:\INSTALL," where D: is the letter of your CD-ROM drive, and press ENTER. Follow the instructions on screen. After installation is complete, double-click the created icon to start.

Still having problems? Send a description of the problem along with your system configuration to cgcdtech@cdmag.com, or mail a letter with the same information to the address below. If you have a defective CD-ROM, a replacement can be obtained by sending the original CD to:

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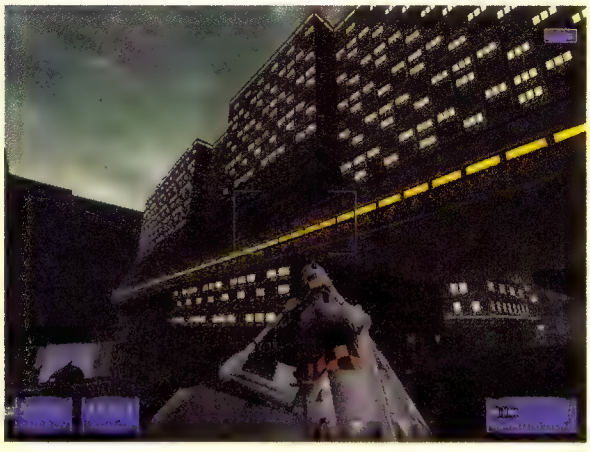

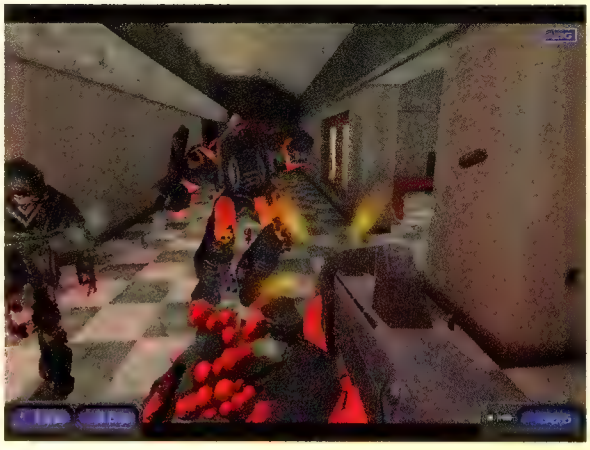

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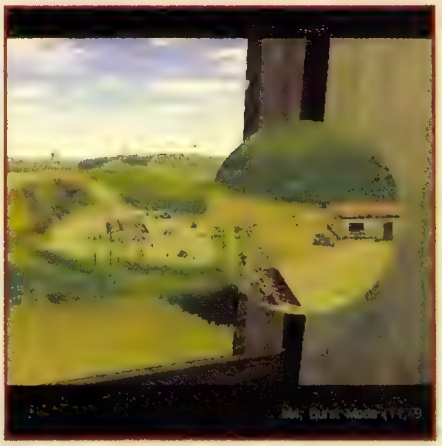
NovaLogic's new first-person shooter, *Delta Force*, is the one of the latest games to combine fast paced first-person action with a realistic mission-based theme. *Delta Force* uses voxel technology, so no 3D accelerator is needed. The full version will include over 40 realistic missions, created with the help of a former Delta Force officer.

Your one mission in this demo is to take out a small drug cartel base. You have several weapons at your disposal, and even a nifty scope on your rifle to pick off enemies from long distances. You can view the action in first-person, or jump to a third-person view *a là Tomb Raider*.

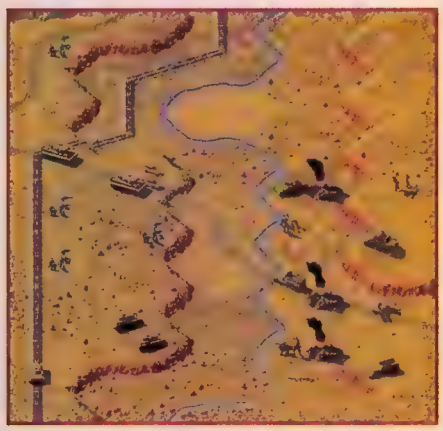
Windows 95, 166MHz MMX Pentium, 16MB RAM
NovaLogic • www.novalogic.com



West Front is a platoon-level, tactical wargame from TalonSoft. It places you right in the middle of World War II, as either the Axis, or the Allies. You start out as a battalion commander, and will rise through the ranks as your performance merits it. You can either go through the war battling in a campaign, or play individual scenarios. The full version even comes with an editor, so you can create an endless amount of different scenarios.

This demo allows you to play through the landing of Omaha beach, as either the Axis or the Allies. Or if you'd prefer, you can have the computer control both sides, and observe.

Windows 95, 98, 90MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB of RAM
TalonSoft • www.talonsoft.com



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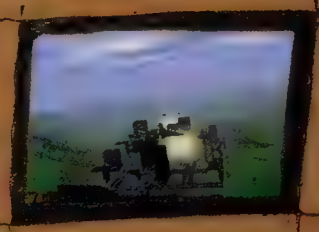

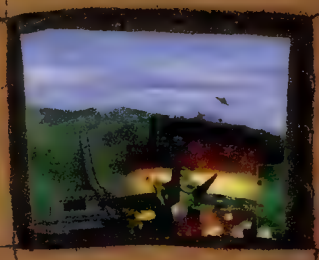

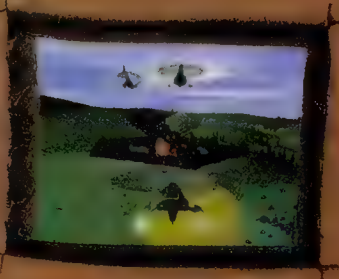

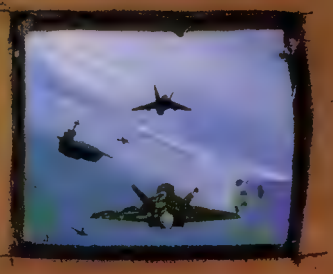

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Once upon a time, in an arcade long long ago, there was a four player game called *Gauntlet*. It certainly wasn't the most complicated game, and not the prettiest, but it had great gameplay, and support for multiple players. Unfortunately, there's never been a very good computer version of *Gauntlet*.

Perhaps that's why Monolith has created *Get Medieval*. While not the exact game, it shares enough traits with the original *Gauntlet* to bring back fond memories of quarters long gone and hours long wasted.

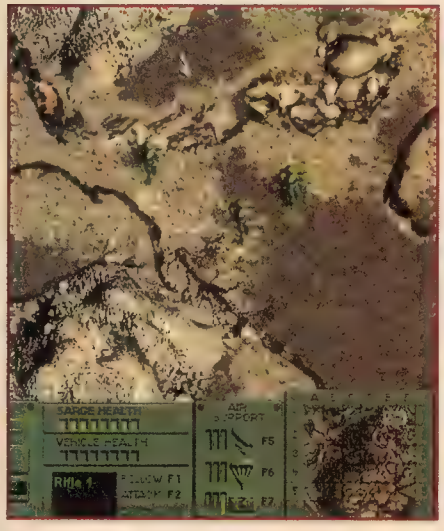
In the full version, you'll have four characters to choose from, and 40 dungeon levels to explore, including an option to have random levels generated. Each character even has their own humorously canned expressions. In this demo you'll be able to play Eryc the Archer, and explore three of the levels.

Windows 95, 90MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB RAM
Monolith • www.lith.com

Army Men is an action/strategy title from 3DO, based on the little green toys so many of us grew up with. All the action is viewed isometrically. You command a squad of troops in real-time, giving them different commands such as defend, attack, and follow your lead (you control the Sarge, and it's vital that he stay alive). When your soldiers are shot, or burned alive, they shatter or melt, just like they did in the sand box as toys.

This demo includes one map, and has two separate objectives, one dependent on the other.

Windows 95, 90 MHz Pentium or higher, 16 MB of RAM
3DO • www.3do.com



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Earth

Wind

The most powerful forces

- Four unique civilizations, each with their own build hierarchies and combat strategies
- Richly detailed environments filled with forests, marshes, rolling hills and mystical keeps
- Command armies of dragon riders, skeletal archers, undead foot soldiers and magic-casting wizards
- A streamlined and easy-to-use interface
- Ambient life forms including non-player humans, wandering monsters and magical life forms

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Water

Fire

ever known, clash this March.

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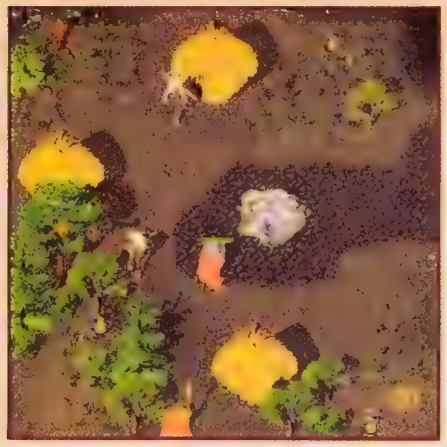


Originally developed in Russia and now being published stateside by Monolith Productions, *Rage of Mages* is a role-playing/strategy hybrid game. It uses an overhead view, much like some of the *Ultima* games or even *Warcraft*, but goes even further with real physics, and real-time lighting effects. There's over 50 different enemies and creatures to battle through, and 30 branching missions that develop throughout the game.

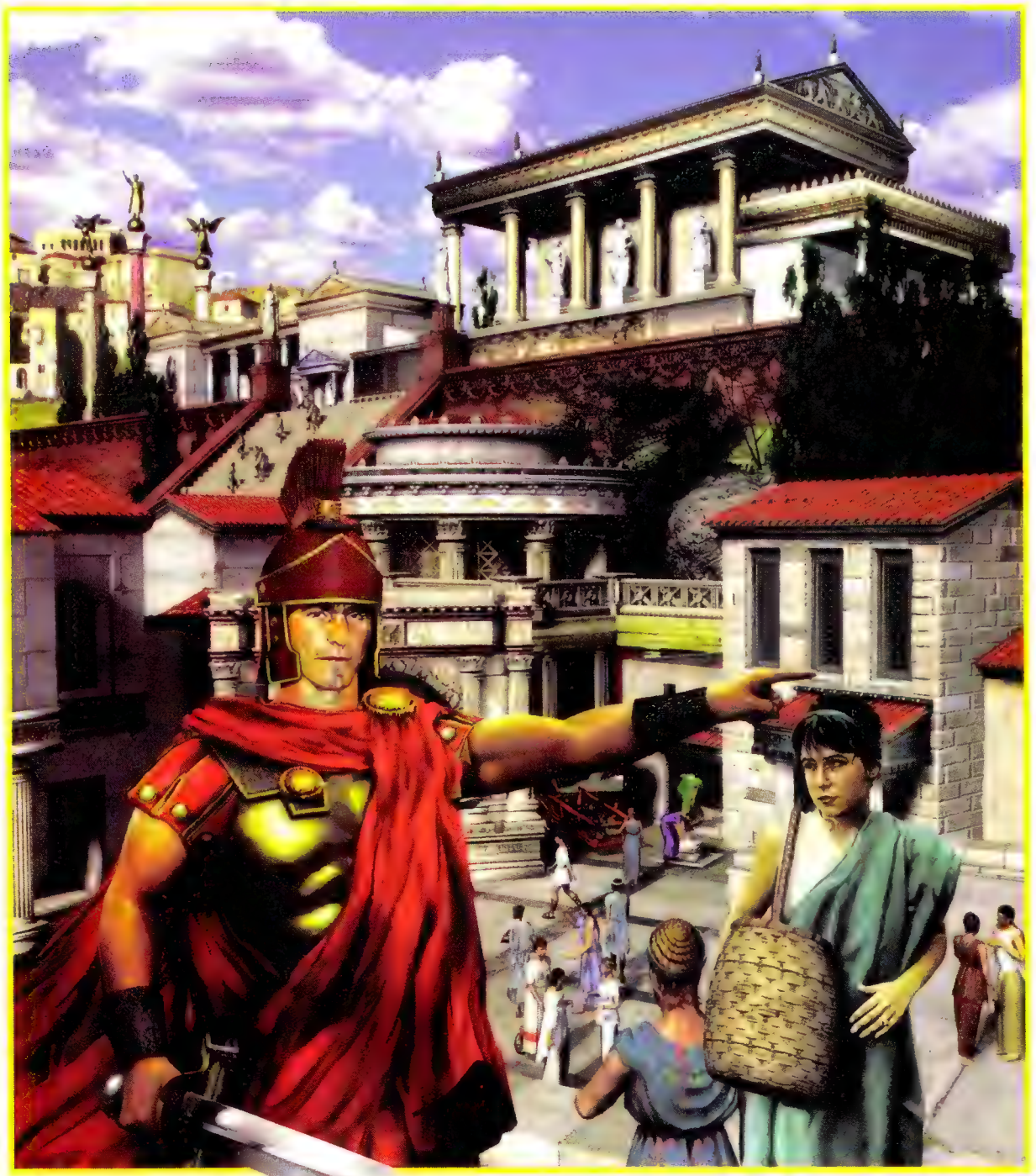
This demo will allow you to explore a fair sized map, and encounter a wide range of monsters and enemies. The two characters you'll be starting out with in your party are Danath, a fighter, and Reniesta, a magic user.

Windows 95, 133MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB RAM
Monolith • www.lith.com

The original *Moto Racer* was a relatively big success, largely due to its arcade quality graphics and great gameplay. This enhanced sequel has many customizable features such as the ability to design your own tracks with a 3D Track Creator, and the option to choose various weather conditions. You may build your own championship race series, or opt to race in Time Trial and Practice modes. You also have a choice of the level of realism, with both an Arcade and a Simulation mode. And of course, the graphics have been improved, with support for the next generation of 3D accelerators using Direct 3D and AGP.

This demo offers two tracks, one Motocross, and one Superbike, each with the opportunity to race two full laps.

Windows 95, 166MHz Pentium or higher, 32MB RAM
Electronic Arts • www.ea.com



CAESAR III

STRATEGY GUIDE

A Word from Senator Fidus Achates

Good morning, Novus Carnus! Your father tells me that you wish to enter the service of the Emperor and the People of Rome. Good for you, lad! The Empire is expanding every day; a man can really make a pile of denarii. You're a man of means, so they'll certainly make you a provincial governor—and I don't want to get your hopes up too high, but a career abroad can take you right to the top.

Of course, you won't get anywhere unless you learn to play the game. Your money will get your foot in the door, but it's wit and strategy that counts on the job—they'll want solid proof that you have what it takes before they'll promote you. I know the way the Emperor's mind works. He'll give you a few minor tasks at first, building a work camp here and an outpost there...a little on-the-job training for a patrician boy still wet behind the ears. Once you've proven yourself, he'll give you a real assignment. Your job as governor will be to bring Roman Peace, Roman Prosperity, and Roman Culture to a new land. You'll have to build, develop, and defend a city with all the amenities that Roman citizens expect.

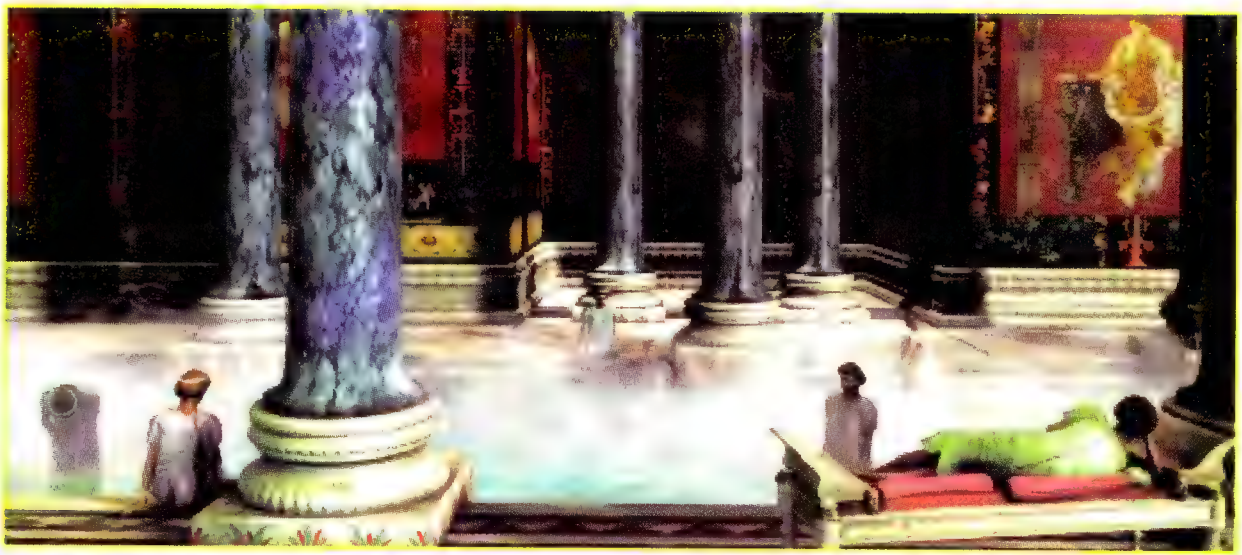
It's no easy task, but the rewards are great. You might even become a senator yourself someday. As a friend of the family, I'm happy to be of help.

Vox Populi, Vox Dei:
The Voice of the people is the Voice of God

Here is the first and best advice that I can give you: learn to listen. And not just to patricians like me! Your Advisors will always have a wealth of detailed information on your province, but facts and figures can blind you to the bigger picture. And of course, your scribes will always send you a note when your city faces a crisis—but do you really want to find out that your people are starving only when they're leaving the city in droves? In the truly important matters of governing, you have only two friends: your chief advisor, the one person in your employ who can give you the bottom line on production, immigration, and popularity—and the man on the street.

Common men can often give you a hint about upcoming trends long before your staff. Go out into the city occasionally and just listen to the people. When you see a woman carrying her baskets to the market and a man pushing a cartload of wheat to the granary, stop a moment and see what they say as they pass in the square. Are they complaining about aching backs and heavy loads? Excellent! It may seem dull to you, Novus Carnos, but when your plebians complain of their work it means that they have nothing else to complain about, and that is the best possible news. In the course of your career, you'll hear much worse; in time those groans and gripes will be music to your ears.

A girl from the local bathhouse and a prefect on patrol are not, perhaps, the sort of people that you commonly associate with. Nonetheless, take an interest in their conversation, and you can learn a great deal. "You should have seen some of the people at the bathhouse today—they were enormous!" On the surface, that's just a casual remark, but a clever ruler reads more into it: fat



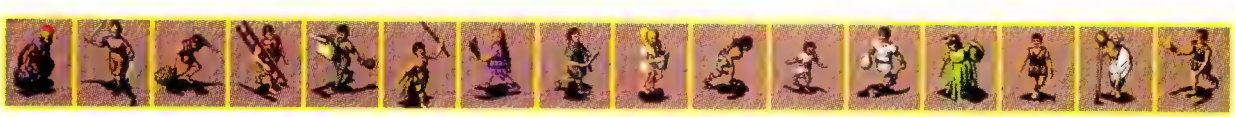
people at a bathhouse means a well-fed populace, and is a sure sign that you have a food surplus. When the prefect says, "The governor of this city wouldn't recognize a good gladiator fight if he was in it," it might be time to build a new amphitheatre, or even a coliseum. Your average plebian likes to see a few bloody contests now and then.

Roman citizens are a free-spoken lot. They'll tell you whatever they have on their minds, and their complaints are not to be dismissed lightly; these are the ills of your administration. Boredom. Crime. Hunger. Unemployment. Even, may the gods help you, Impiety: they worry when their patron dieties are displeased.

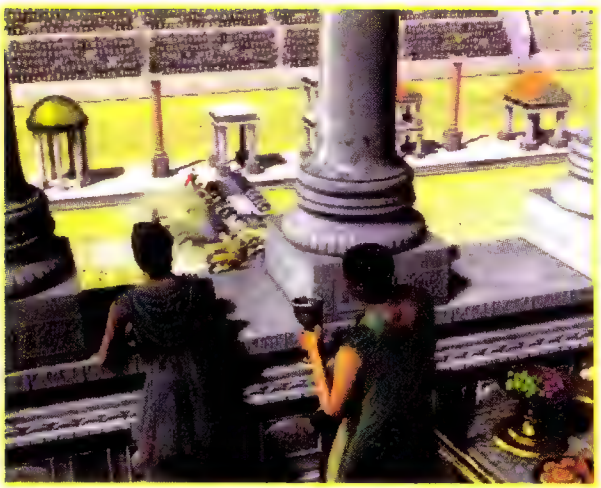
Keep a finger on the pulse of the city—listen to your citizens.

Keep an eye on the traffic as it passes you by. If the cart men start asking "What's the use of making this stuff when nobody wants it?" you know that they have nowhere to take their goods; you've run out of space at the granaries or warehouses. Is some angry young fool standing around yelling, protesting your administration? If so, you may need more prefects in the area—and no, not just to bash his head! There's nothing like lack of proper police protection to turn a neighborhood into a slum, and bring all sorts of hotheads crawling out of the woodwork. You'd best hope that crime is all he's angry about.

If you don't pay attention, disaster will strike, swift and sure. Don't think you can live by that old saw, "Oderint dum metuant," ("Let them hate so long as they fear"); you're a governor, not Caesar. Your people can hurt you, rest assured! If they riot, they'll destroy the beautiful and oh-so-expensive structures you've built: granaries are a favorite target, especially when you've been starving them. Property damage wastes money; what's more, it'll lower your Peace rating, and maybe ruin your chances of promotion. Of course, burning a granary isn't the worst thing that your people can do to you; they can also pack up and leave town. If you ever do see someone dragging all his worldly possessions in a gunny sack, don't let him leave the city without trying to find out why. He may not have anything useful to say, but if it was hunger, unemployment or lack of housing that drove him out, there may still be time for you to do something about it.



Ars Romana: Roman Culture



Reward your hardworking people with a host of diversions from the theatre to the hippodrome.

One of the most rewarding aspects of your career is the spreading of Roman culture. There are very few sights more gratifying than a Roman hippodrome in the middle of a city, or a coliseum filled with yelling, cheering Roman citizens. Theatres and amphitheatres are also beautiful structures, and the people always express deep appreciation to a governor that supplies them with good and plentiful entertainments. Of course, it takes quite a lot of denarii to build those structures, and while everyone wants access to them, almost no one wants to live directly beside them—the noise and dust of the arena is fine for an afternoon, but not when you're trying to sleep! And of course, there's also the expense of the facilities to train your gladiators, lion-tamers and actors—it takes money to build them and labor to keep them running.

There's more to Roman culture than games and plays, however. A minor side issue is education; building libraries will also raise your Culture rating, and quality of life will be increased by building schools for little children, and academies for the teenagers. But the one aspect of a city's cultural life which you must pay most attention to, once a few entertainments are built, is your relationship with the Roman gods.

There are five deities who impact the life of your city: Venus, the goddess of Love, who also rules in matters of Peace and harmony; Mars, the god of War; Neptune, god of the sea; Mercury, the god of commerce and trade; and Ceres, the Earth Mother. Your people will expect and demand that temples be erected to their gods within the city limits. Every temple built to one god will please him, or her, but each will expect more temples as your population grows—and every temple built to one god or goddess will make all the others jealous. There are only two ways to appease them; either build

Overlays
Sep 389 BC To The new governor
A small festival was held this evening.
Everybody welcomes the break from the
grind of day-to-day life.
Small festival

them new and bigger temples, or hold a festival in their honor.

Festivals are quite expensive, but they are an important part of Roman life and a vital tool in maintaining your relationship with the gods. Keeping up a constant round of small festivals, each to a different god or goddess, is an excellent idea. This is how you'll keep a displeased god or goddess from becoming angry or even wrathful. Smirk if you must—I know half of you youngsters these days are atheists, or have joined that strange new mystery cult of the Israelites, and are worshipping a crucified Carpenter—but your people will take these matters very seriously. If the gods are genuinely wrathful, bad things will happen. An angry Venus will foment rebellion and disorder among your people. Neptune can sink your ships. Mercury can and will rain fire and brimstone onto your warehouses and granaries. Mars will cost you the battles you fight in the field. Ceres will ruin your harvests.

Hold festival to Ceres
Small festival 222 Denarii
Large festival 445 Denarii
Grand festival 891 Denarii 9 Units
Small festival

Festivals can account for a serious outlay of denarii, but are crowd pleasers that also appease the gods.

As a governor, you'll want to take any chance you get to kill two birds with one stone. The one temple that pleases all the gods equally, leaving none jealous, is the Oracle; build them whenever you have the money and marble to do so.

Temple of Venus

Temple of Ceres

Oracle

Each temple you build and dedicate to a god or goddess will earn points with that particular deity, but may arouse the jealousy of others in the Pantheon.

Pax Romana: The Roman Peace

Ah, I can tell you're worried just by looking at you. Someone's been filling your head with tales of barbarian hordes, and pagan priests who'll nail your skull to an oak tree. Well, good! It saves me the trouble of warning you about that sort of thing; you will face barbarians out there, especially as you go further and further from Rome. From time to time, you'll have to take a break from building the Empire and give a thought to defending it.

Fortunately for you, you have at your fingertips the power of the Roman legions, the greatest infantry force the world has yet seen. No barbarian horde on earth can take a Roman legion one-on-one, in fair combat. As a governor, your main task as defender of the peace is to raise those legions, not simply to command them. You will usually be warned in advance when the Emperor expects trouble in a province; once you're warned, it's up to you. You'll have to build forts to house your troops, barracks to

recruit and train them, and academies to hone their fighting skills to their peak, and master difficult formations. You'll also have to supply them with weapons, and to give them a back-up system if all else fails—walls and towers.

If the unthinkable should happen, and your trained soldiers should be defeated in battle, vae victis my boy—woe to the vanquished! You will find yourself largely helpless. The barbarians will sack and destroy everything they encounter until they are killed. The one hope remaining to your city, besides a hastily erected (and hopefully impenetrable) wall, is the prefects, gladiators and lion-tamers who may be working within the city limits. They won't attack the barbarians in an organized formation, but they also won't allow themselves to be slaughtered without a fight.

Of course, even in situations where you will not face barbarian assault, you will always have a

Peace rating. Peace is not just the resistance to outside attack; it's a measure of the harmony and safety within your province. Crime and riots in your city will lower your Peace rating. Make sure you have plenty of prefects patrolling your city, keeping fire and crime at a minimum.

Don't get so busy building monuments to yourself that you neglect to keep the peace. Liberally sprinkle prefectures throughout your city.

Walls alone won't keep your city safe. Recruit and train soldiers to turn back the barbarian horde.

The Gentle Art of Prosperity

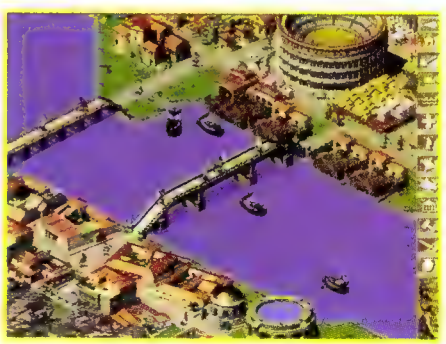
Of all your many tasks as a governor, achieving Prosperity is the most delicate, complex, and difficult to master. A young ruler can easily find himself deeply in debt, trying to build all the entertainment facilities and services his people demand. When your coffers go dry, you'll find yourself in trouble with the Emperor. Even though he'll cover your debts for a short time, you'll have to find a way to turn a profit and bring your books out of the red, or face his wrath.

Making a brand new city pay for itself is one of the hardest tasks you'll have to face. Once you know the tricks, of course, you'll wonder how it could ever have been such a mystery! When you've earned the Emperor's trust, you may even be called in to clean up the mess that some other poor fool has made in a distant province, and return an ailing city to profitability.

Profit, of course, is the key to raising the Prosperity rating of your city. Ah, you think to yourself—that's very simple! I'll just be sure to build a forum every few blocks, to see that my taxes are all being collected—then I'll raise the tax rate! But taxes are not the answer. If you overtax your people, your Prosperity rating will actually decline—the

You can't make it on your own! Establishing trade with neighboring cities will get your province up and running.

rating is based not only on your cash flow, but on their general sense of well-being. At most, your taxes should cover the amount you're paying city employees, with a few denarii left over for the annual tribute to Rome. And don't think that you'll save money by cutting the wages of your city employees, Novus Carnos! This will drop your Prosperity rating as well, and what's more it'll discourage immigration, which is never something you want. In fact, you'll probably want to pay your workers more than the thirty denarii that they would ordinarily expect as wages in Rome—after all, you are out on the fringes. You have to give people some reason to come to your province! I'd recommend a starting wage of 35 denarii; it's enough to encourage newcomers, but not so much that you should be forced to drop wages later.



The real money for your city has to come from trade. When you first come to a new province, especially a virgin land untouched by real civilization, stop for a moment and look at a map of the Empire. There are usually a few cities that are willing to open trade with you. If you want to make money, you'll have to supply them with goods and commodities. Every city sells some commodities and buys others. What are your neighbors looking for? Pottery, wine, fruit, weapons?

When you see grapes ripening on the vine and livestock fattening in the barnyard, you know you're on your way to prosperity.

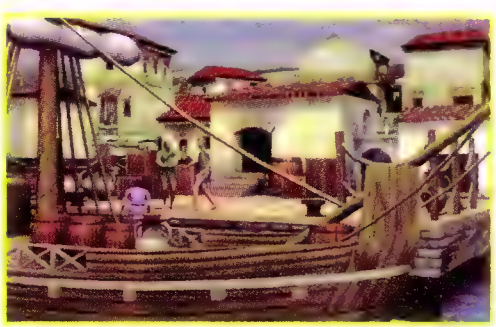
Now look at your own land. Check and see what sort of farms you can build. You may be able to farm wheat, of course, and wheat farms produce twice as much food as any other type, but your people need a little variety in their diet anyway—they won't be happy eating nothing but bread. Can you produce vegetables? Fruit? Can you herd pigs? Can you catch fish? If you harvest a large surplus, some of your more exotic food items might make their way into the warehouse. Some provinces will buy these things, and producing them is a quick, easy way to make a few denarii.

The next step is to look at your industrial capacity. You'll have to find out what sort of raw materials you can gather from your province. Perhaps the mud along your riverbanks and lakesides is suitable for a clay pit. You might be able to grow olives or grapes on your farmland. You could have trees suitable for cutting timber, or mountains that would support an iron mine. There might even be building-grade marble about—one of the most precious commodities on the market.

Other provinces may be willing to pay you for raw materials—olives, iron, timber, etc.—but of course the real money is in finished goods. For every raw source material, there is a workshop that churns out the finished product. Clay is fired into pottery. Olives are pressed into precious oil. Timber is made into furniture, iron into weapons, and grapes into wine. Think of it this way; when the ship from Syracusae pulls into

A quick way to judge a neighborhood's prosperity is to look at the houses people are building. A multi-level dwelling like this is a sign of a full purse.

your harbor, with cargo space for only twelve units of merchandise, would you rather the captain go with 12 units of iron, leaving you with a mere 600 denarii after all duties and levies are taken—or would you rather see him ship out with a cargo of your finely-crafted weapons, which leaves you with 4,000 denarii? I assume my point is well-taken. The profit margin on finished goods is large enough that it actually makes sense to import raw materials and sell the finished product, if clay, olives, iron, or timber is not available locally.



Of course, your own people have needs as well. Exporting goods is all well and good, but as your population increases and people start building a better quality of housing, they'll need pottery, furniture and olive oil lamps of their own. Have a care not to sell every single unit of merchandise out of a warehouse, if your people need it!

Establish a good flow of cash and you'll do more than raise your Prosperity rating; you can even start paying yourself a decent wage. As a civic-minded gentleman from a good family, you may be tempted to spurn that money, especially since your starting salary on the first few jobs is so low, but don't cheat yourself! Later on in your career, when the challenges are greater, you'll be very glad to have some pocket change of your own. You may need to dip into your own purse to cover city expenses from time to time, especially if you need to raise a wall or a few legions fast.

Imperial Favor

Ave, atque, vale. (Hail and farewell)

Last but not least, of course, you'll have to maintain a good working relationship with Rome—and by Rome, of course, I mean the Emperor. Earning the Emperor's favor is a relatively simple matter: don't waste his money, pay him his tribute, and when he asks for something, render unto Caesar what is Caesar's—fast.

If you run your province into debt, the Emperor will be angry. If you don't have the money when your annual tribute to Rome comes due, the Emperor will be angry. In general, the best way to curry Imperial favor is to be a competent manager of your province and to keep your city prosperous and content.

Every so often, the Emperor will make a friendly, personal request. He may want 15 units of fresh fruit, or 10 of olive oil. He may want weapons, or even a trained cohort. Whatever he asks for, he knows your province is capable of producing it; how you handle the matter is in your hands, but he will not relent. If he wants 10 units of oil, you will have to get your hands on them somehow, and within the time frame he gives—generally you'll have 12 months to comply. If you fail to do it in the time he asks, it will be noted and you will earn his displeasure, but you will not get out of the job—he'll simply give you a new deadline and a more urgent warning not to fail.

In situations where you need a very high level of imperial Favor to get your next promotion, you may want to resort to cheap bribery. Gifts of money from your own personal savings—derived, of course, from the city coffers that pay your salary—are always welcome. You'll have to keep in mind, however, that Caesar is never your friend. If you offer him money every year as a personal gift, he'll come to expect it as his due. If you're unable to keep up those payments—again, he'll be displeased. In general, it's best to avoid such entanglements when you can.

Salus Populi Supremo Lex Esto: Let the welfare of the People be the supreme law

In the end, you'll have to exercise your own judgement. You'll simply have to do your best to please Caesar and the gods, demanding as they can be, and in the meantime keep your people fed and well protected. You'll be terribly busy sometimes, developing trade and industry within the city, or raising troops—whether for the benefit of Rome or simply your own defense. My final advice to you is this: don't forget your people.

Ultimately, the fate of the entire Empire rests on the backs of the plebians. Improve their lives when you can. Make sure they have fresh water to drink, doctors and barbers to care for them, bath-houses and hospitals to maintain their health. Surround them with beauty—gardens, statues, plazas. They will reward you with high tax revenue, hard work, and a good reputation; what's more, the beauty of the city itself will surely speak to your soul. What you raise with a few denarii now may stand for a thousand years or more. Let them look on your cities in years to come and say: These Romans knew how to build, and how to live.

Pax vobiscum. (Peace be with you.)

Arinn Dembo Cicalis

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Discovery consists of seeing

what everybody has seen

and thinking

what nobody has thought.

Albert Szent-Györgyi

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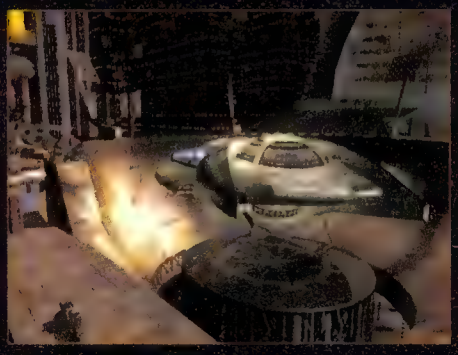
Discover Who Among Your Friends Will Rule
Go head-to-head in multiplayer world-building. But remember – in war, even friends can become enemies. A nanovirus you release in one opponent's city may spread to others, leading you into a war with an unintended party.



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The walking, talking retail blues

If you think every game appears on store shelves, think again

Monolith Productions is a 60-65 person strong software developer in Kirkland, Washington. Founded in 1995, their first commercial product was *Blood*, which GT Interactive released in 1997. Since that game appeared, they've produced and self-published *Claw*, a side-scrolling platform game *à la* Sega's *Sonic* series, and *Get Medieval*, a game heavily influenced (to put it mildly) by the arcade classic *Gauntlet*. Also in the works is *Blood 2*, published by GT Interactive, and their own self-published titles *Rage of Mages* and *Shogo: Mobile Armor Division*, both previewed last month.

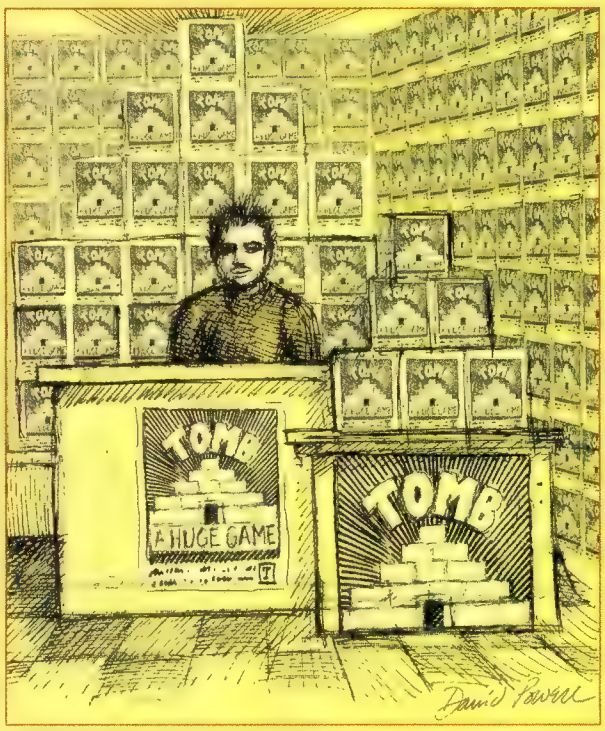
Despite having a track record of solid products, Monolith is finding it difficult to get its self-published titles on the shelf of your local computer store. And they're not alone.

The retail story

Developers create the games and publishers get them into stores. Some companies do both, like Sierra, Eidos, Interplay or Activision; they develop titles in-house and publish them as well. Publishers work with distributors, who then sell products to the retail chains, who then put them on the shelf so gamers can buy them.

A common perception of retailers is that they're in the business to make money—which is true—so they're concerned more about a game's sales potential than its quality—which, depending on your source, may or may not be true. [Note: None of the retailers contacted for this story returned our calls.] They look for other things in a game: established franchises (movie tie-ins, etc.), sequels, or proven publishers. Obviously they'd prefer all games to be brilliant so they'll get return buyers for the seemingly endless parade of sequels.

"They are very concerned about the box design and planned ad campaigns," says Monolith's CEO Jason Hall. "What is actually in the box does not seem to be that important."



According to Doug Zartman, Director of Publicity Engineering for independent developer/publisher Bungie Software, there's another reason they want good, bug-free games. "[Retailers] don't want returns from angry customers." (Astute readers will also notice one advantage of being an independent developer: wacky job titles.)

"In order to fly off the shelves a game needs buzz/word-of-mouth and solid marketing and advertising," says Zartman. "In order to not come back, it has to be a good game. Retailers are looking for evidence of both of these things before deciding to pick up your title, and how deep to stock it."

"I don't think originality enters into the equation," says Karthik Bala, Director of Development and CEO of developer Vicarious Visions. "Naturally, games that are visually more stunning than the competition get a lot of attention because when these buyers decide what to take into the channel, they're *looking* at the product for maybe 15 seconds... if it looks better than the competition or has more eye candy, it's gotta be better, right? This thinking helped make FMV the rage a few years ago. Now it's real-time graphics and polygons."

Shelf spaced out

There's a fixed amount of physical space available on store shelves (standardized packaging would help a lot here), so retailers can pick and choose what they want to carry. It's also well-documented that products with many store copies, prominently displayed will sell better, regardless of their quality, than a great game buried in the corner of the store, which can languish unsold forever. With that in mind, a publisher can also purchase various merchandising marketing vehicles, like "end-caps" (those big displays at the end of the aisle), all of which are designed to make the product stand out at the store, thereby increasing sales. However, these are very expensive, easily in the six figure range for major retailers like Best Buy, CompUSA and Electronics Boutique.

"When you're courting a retailer for the first time," says Zartman, "you show them all the great previews your new game has gotten, how

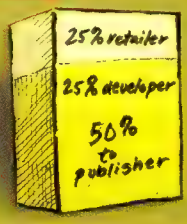
The $5 Million Dollar Question

Direct Sales

$49.95 street price
Sell 100,000 units

Self-Publish

$39.95 street price
Sell 170,000 units



Developer/Publisher

$39.95 street price
Sell 670,000 units

Let's say you produce a game that has a suggested retail price of $59.95. You need to make $5 million in order to afford a new Ferrari for all of your staff. (Note: If you sell it direct, you need to price it above the retail stores so as not to incur their wrath.) As an aside, keep in mind that only 72 games sold more than 100,000 copies last year (Source: PC Data).

you'll spend X million dollars this fall on advertising and end-caps and other marketing, how you have a proven track record of making successful games. You've got to get them in this comfort zone where they're happy not just stocking your title, but stocking it deep—ordering 10,000 copies instead of 1,000. That's the only way you'll have a blockbuster."

While this system is standard across the entire packaged goods industry, from the local grocery store to Electronics Boutique, it makes it incredibly difficult—and expensive—for a newcomer to get a product on the shelf.

The problem with Shogo

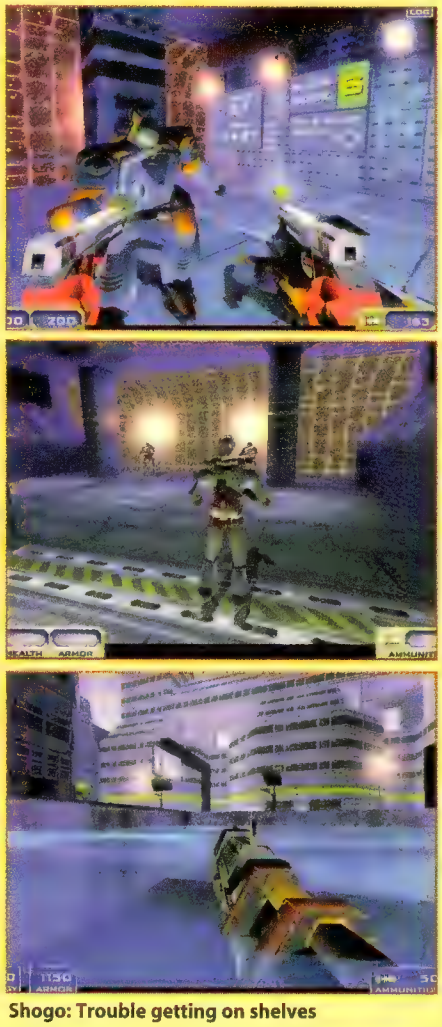
Case in point: *Shogo: Mobile Armor Division*. Despite competitive features, Monolith had some trouble getting stores to carry the game. According to Hall, it's not enough to have fan sites (which *Shogo* has) or public anticipation (which, among the 3D cognoscenti, there is). "It is important that a retail buyer has heard of your game in some way before you go in to sell it to them," he explains. "We have been fortunate in this respect, as the buyers that may not have heard of *Shogo* were uncharacteristically happy to let us demonstrate it. After that, there were no major issues, since the quality of *Shogo* was so high, and it is clearly a high profile title."

The question isn't why would stores carry *Shogo*; rather, it's why wouldn't they? A first-person 3D action game with an anime feel, it allows you to switch back-and-forth from running around on foot and traversing the environments in a *Transformers*-style big robot. There are four different MCA (Mobile Combat Armor) models to choose from, each with their own physics.

Rather than go for the fewer attackers/advanced AI that most developers are striving for, *Shogo* is going for the old-school *DOOM/Duke Nukem* approach of lots of bad guys and lots of big weapons. "We easily have the biggest weapons in a shooter," boasts Hall, jokingly referring to them as "big penis weapons." Most are of the rocket-launcher variety and tend to turn opponents into bloody stains on the wall.

Perhaps most importantly, *Shogo* is completely buzzword compliant. Some of its technical highlights include Code Accessible Node Transformation and Linking, liquid-based reflection mapping, displacement mapping, location-specific reflection mapping, landscaped terrain mapping, direction illumination, atmospheric planar surface shadowmapping, model vertex perturbing and the always popular real-time inverse model tessellation and deformation.

According to Hall, though, all of this technology also has little effect on the effort to get a game on the shelf. "Developers would be surprised to find out that the 2000 hours they spent on texelated-radiosity really doesn't make much difference [in how many copies stores will take]."



Shogo: Trouble getting on shelves

Luckily for gamers, Monolith's story with *Shogo* has a happy ending—you should be able to buy it from the major computer stores this Holiday season.

Why self-publish?

With all of the potential pitfalls a small publisher faces, why not go with an established publisher? It costs a lot of money and power to get on the shelf, and most publishers—the Electronic Arts, GT Interactives, Microsofts and Activisions of the world—have plenty of both. In order to get that money and power, you need at least one successful product—the more the merrier. But if you can't get any products on the shelf… well, obviously there's a problem.

Bala's company, Vicarious Visions, is in talks with publishers to handle *Terminus*. However, they didn't jump right into an agreement. "We are hesitant about signing on with a publisher early on in development. There are a lot of distractions, influence from external forces such as marketing departments/fads/buzzwords/hype telling us what type of game to make. That can really lead to harming the game design process."

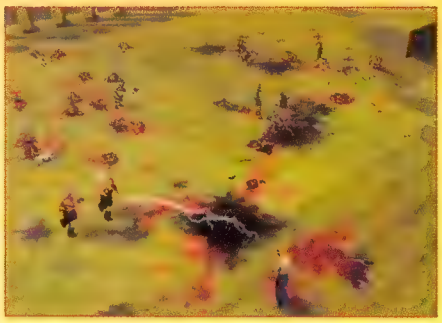
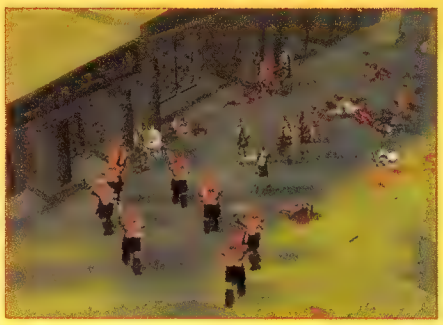
There's an even bigger reason to go without a publisher—money. According to Hall, Monolith made more money selling fewer copies of their self-published game *Claw* than they did with *Blood*, which was published by GT Interactive. "The whole developer/publisher relationship isn't structured to work for a company of our size," he explained. "*Claw* proved to us that we can make money on our own (through OEM and retail sales), so we decided to change our strategy."

"We developed/published *Dark Angael* [a side-scrolling platform game] ourselves, trying out direct distribution methods as well as licensing to retail distributors worldwide," says Bala. "Although we were moderately successful in Europe, it proved incredibly difficult to tap into U.S. retail distribution." For *Terminus*, they feel being a developer and leaving the publishing to the big boys is the way to go.

Bungie had plenty of offers from big publishers to handle their game *Myth: The Fallen Lords*, in the USA, but they're happy with the independent route.

"[With a large publisher] there might be more total copies of *Myth* on hard drives around the world," says Zartman. "But we almost certainly would have made less money and wouldn't have had the complete control over the franchise we have now."

Bala is more pragmatic about the future of his company. "Unless you get major financial backing to become a publisher, it's very difficult these days to circumvent the need for a publisher."

Myth II: Soulblighter fights its way onto the shelves this season

A Myth in the making

While you can read all about their latest game *Myth II: Soulblighter* on page 76, an equally interesting story is how challenging it's been to get it in your hands.

To understand *Myth II*, you need to start with its prequel. *Myth: The Fallen Lords* was a revolutionary strategy game, with plenty of pre-release press coverage (including a cover story from this magazine), created by a developer/publisher who'd had incredible retail success with the Macintosh-based *Marathon* games. However, they were somewhat surprised to find out that retailers were reluctant to take *Myth* on faith alone.

"In *Myth*'s case, it was clearly a strategy game that took place in real-time, but yet very different from the crowd of RTS games the retailers were familiar with," says Zartman. "So you had to explain that it would stand out because it was different, but it wasn't so different that gamers wouldn't get it, or that it was outside the genre. Fortunately, the advance press and buzz it got supported both of these claims."

"[Retailers] knew we could do really big successful titles on the Mac, but they wondered if we could replicate that success on the PC. So our buy-in [copies stores stocked on their shelves] was smaller than it would have been if we were larger."

For *Myth II*, Bungie has been able to leverage the original's games success into a bigger launch, which should make it even more successful.

Christmas crunch

According to Hall, this is a year-round problem, not one that occurs solely during the crowded holiday season. If you tried to release a game during the low-release summer months, you face the same problems and processes. "It's all about the box and the hype to get the shelf space...."

Zartman feels that releasing in the off-season can increase your chance of getting copies on the shelf, but you have to balance that against the potential sales loss of not being available during the peak buying season. "You'll still pick up the core gamers off-season, but with the casual gamer audience, the only time you *know* they're buying games (or someone's buying games for them) is Christmas. In order to get them, the game would still have to be fresh when the next Christmas rolls around, which is possible, but not common."

The alternatives to retail

"There really is no viable alternative," according to Hall. The combination of high download times, slow modems, Internet commerce phobias and the difficulty in getting people to come to your site to purchase your product represents a set of, at best, dicey alternatives. (Just ask The Artist Formerly Known as Prince, whose *Crystal Ball* CD, which had an online-only launch, was considered something of a bust.) Possible retail alternatives could include shareware, direct web sales and partnering with a single online sales agent supplemental sources of sales.

"There is something to be said about going into a store, physically grabbing something, buying it, and walking out of the store," says Hall. "The real meat and potatoes still rests in the retail channel."

"You can't beat retail presence for picking up the casual gamers," says Zartman. "The impulse buyers or the parents doing their holiday shopping—that's the huge mass of customers you have to reach to have a huge success, and they aren't serious enough about gaming to go searching for specific titles online, or wait for shipping—they just want to drive down to a mall and pick up whatever they find there. Ubiquity is key because hitting both hard-core and casual gamers is key."

One way to help a small publisher is to buy the games directly from them. "When you buy direct from an indie [independent] publisher," says Zartman, "they keep a greater percentage of the profit." Unfortunately, the actual number of potential sales to individuals is a drop in the bucket compared to the large orders retailers place.

"Although you get more dollars per unit," says Bala, "the units sold are very low in comparison to retail. I think this will change over time, but as many companies are discovering, the Internet game software sales market isn't quite there yet."

Zartman agrees. "There's no way your web sales are going to match the sales of having 10 copies in every WalMart in the land." However, there is more potential for direct sales down the road, at least for Bungie. "Our web sales are a significant source of revenue and are growing as more people get wired and become more comfortable with buying over the web."

What can you do?

"At the end of the day, we all want the same thing—fun, original, innovative, good games," says Bala. "The press and the gamers have just as much responsibility and power to making this happen as independent developers/publishers. The retailers and distributors will listen and follow." He feels one way to enact change is for gamers, and especially the press, to spend less time covering and/or reading about derivative clone-games and more with the original independent games. Of course, in order for this change to occur, readers need to be willing to come along for the ride.

On a more personal level, Hall feels that gamers can do a lot by creating fan sites and posting messages on the Usenet. This helps give an impression of excitement over the product, which can influence buyers. "And every gamer should buy 10 copies each," he adds.

Zartman concurs, saying, "There's no more effective help than word-of-mouth—you see a game you like, talk about it." But he balks at the prospect of everyone buying 10 copies. "Two each would be just fine."

–Steve Bauman

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The Rise of Rome

Age of Empires takes a Roman holiday

The Carthaginians knew how to host a barbecue

FIRST LOOK WHEN MICROSOFT released Ensemble Studios' *Age of Empires* last year, it was something of an event. As good as it was, though, there were things that weren't quite right. A patch fixed some of the complaints, but not one of the major gripes: no Romans. For a game that was supposed to cover the glories of the ancient world, the absence of the empire of the city on the Tiber was puzzling. Now, a year after the original game debuted, that's being remedied. The Romans are coming! The Romans are coming!

And the Carthaginians, the Palmyrans, and the Macedonians too. In what is really something between an expansion disk and a game extension, *The Rise of Rome* will provide four new civilizations, complete with new units (Slinger, Camel Rider, Fire Galley, Scythe Chariot, and Armored Elephant), new technologies (Logistics, Martyrdom, Medicine, Tower Shield), larger maps, and different map types. New rules make their appearance as well, including the ability to queue units in the production pipeline. There will be four new Roman campaigns of 19 scenarios as well. The other new civilizations are rather necessary to provide opponents for the Romans, who, when they weren't fighting amongst themselves, were beating up on their neighbors. (What, no Gauls?)

Elephants like water; crossing the Alps in armor is thirsty work

In actual play, *The Rise of Rome* promises to retain much the same feel of the original game. The new scenarios of the Roman campaign look to be well-crafted; certainly, the maps show promise. Unit pathing appears to be better and best of all, Armored Elephants rock. Fans of *Age of Empires* should expect more of what they like; the beta we were able to play was very stable and quite far along. Gamers who didn't like the original probably won't find much in the expansion to make them change their mind. We'll know for sure later this fall when the final version of *The Rise of Rome* makes its way to the forum. *–Robert Mayer*

Age of Empires: The Rise of Rome • Microsoft • Windows 95, 98

BRIEFS: Corporate Marriages, Part One—Hasbro and its wholly-owned subsidiary New HIAC Corp. agreed to **buy MicroProse** in a deal worth approximately $70 million. Hasbro will combine MicroProse's activities with those of Hasbro Interactive. The deal put to rest all the acquisition rumors that swirled around MicroProse, one of the pioneers in the computer gaming industry. Hasbro said that it would keep MicroProse's development staff, but that consolidations would probably occur in other areas... **Corporate Marriages, Part Two**—**Electronic Arts purchased Westwood Studios** and other development assets from Virgin Interactive Entertainment in a deal worth approximately $122.5 million. The deal puts the lucrative

Interstate '82

Return to the decade of Duran Duran

Is that a... Countach?

FIRST LOOK THE '80S. A DECADE OF terrifying hair, truly wretched synthesizer music, terrible movies, Molly Ringwald, Flock of Seagulls, teen sex comedies... OK, so the decade did bring us the Replacements (the best band no one ever heard of), *Raiders of the Lost Ark* and an MTV that used to be a music rather than a lifestyle channel. People seem to feel the '70s were cool, but the '80s... oh dear.

Into that milieu comes *Interstate '82*, Activision's sequel to the acclaimed *Interstate '76*. *Interstate '76* oozed style, with its funky music and slick cut scenes. *Interstate '82* continues in that vein, with a terrifying-sounding "original New Wave soundtrack" and a setting in the land of subtlety and taste, Las Vegas. In the most basic sense, you still drive cars around and shoot things while following a plot that involves all sort of conspiracies about presidents and Latin American leaders, but Activision is promising more mission diversity and complexity.

Colored lighting alert! Colored lighting alert!

The 3D engine, shared with the upcoming *Heavy Gear 2*, allows indoor and outdoor environments and supports the usual complement of effects: fog, lightning, rain, fancy lighting, etc. The missions, of which there are more than 30 in 20 unique areas, take place in malls, cities, caves and tunnels and will allow you to jump moving drawbridges and partially completed freeway ramps. Multiplayer is being enhanced with dynamic joining and dropping (the game won't quit if someone gets disconnected) and more setup options for the person hosting the game.

We were one of the few publications not to lavish praise on the original game. We felt the mission structures were too rigid and not particularly interesting, the AI was too simple and the 3D technology performed poorly for its relatively mediocre visual payoff. The sequel seems to be addressing most of these deficiencies, but we won't know for sure if it's successful until the game hits shelves in early 1999. *–Steve Bauman*

Interstate '82 • Activision • Windows 95

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ruthless.com

Stylish strategy gone nasty

FIRST LOOK JACK TRAMIEL, THE former head of Atari, once said, "Business is war," a sentiment that would certainly be shared by the team at Red Storm responsible for the upcoming *ruthless.com*. Kevin Perry, Producer and Lead Designer on the project, describes *ruthless* as "an empire building game where your empire happens to be a corporation," specifically a corporation in the computer business. Before you go "Eww, business sim!" it should be noted that the game bears about as much relation to, say, *Capitalism* as *Monopoly* does to business school. This isn't to say that it's schlocky (one look at the stylish screenshots should disabuse you of any such thoughts) or dumbed down, just that its focus is different; it is instead a strategy game of business-as-war.

The colored squares indicate—in a very abstract way—the "market segments" each corporation controls

The colored squares indicate—in a very abstract way—the "market segments" each corporation controls

The game uses simultaneous turns, so each player plots his or her moves (depending on your "staff" you can make two to several moves a turn) and then all moves happen at the same time. You can use business-like tactics—buyouts, executive raids, legal battles—or monkey business-like tactics—computer hacking and other outright criminal activities—to disrupt your opponents and to advance your empire. Gameplay revolves around six scenarios ("situations" may be a better term, as they play differently each time), things like "Take down EvilSoft" wherein six smaller "companies" try to eat up the business territory of a large near-monopoly (and then eat up each other). Each scenario can be played in one to 1.5 hours, or all together in a campaign of 10-15 hours. Multiplayer games with up to six people will take an hour or so and can be run via LAN, hot-seat, or the Internet.

Like other games from Red Storm, *ruthless.com* will come out simultaneously with a Clancy-esque book of the same name; both should be on store shelves this November. *–Scott Udell*

ruthless.com • Red Storm • Windows 95

Command & Conquer franchise in EA's already formidable stable of titles… **Corporate Suitor, Wanted**—**Cendant**, the giant consumer services firm, began looking to **sell off** its software business, Cendant Software. The company is looking for serious offers from possible buyers for the business unit, which includes **Blizzard Entertainment**, **Sierra On-Line**, Davidson & Associates, and Knowledge Adventure. Cendant is trying to recover from a massive accounting irregularities scandal that led to a **$14 billion** drop in market capitalization in one day… **Even More Merger Mania**—The shareholders of The **Learning Company** and **Broderbund** approved the **$420 million merger** between the two companies. That means that The Learning Company, an

Speed Busters

Fulfill your need to crash and burn

FIRST LOOK IF YOU FEEL A NEED for speed but find that *Need for Speed* lacks the carnage you crave, perhaps UbiSoft's *Speed Busters* will be your ticket to ride. The game is powered by the same 3D technology and physics engine that drove UbiSoft's fantastic *F1 Racing Simulation*. Unlike most 3D accelerated racing games, the game will have a full 3D cockpit.

The purpose of the game is to go really fast, win races and earn cash. Well duh. Where *Speed Busters* differs is that the police are the ones giving you the cash, and it's up to you to trip their radar guns as often as possible. Earning extra cash allows you to upgrade your car with new mechanical parts and road assistance kits. More importantly, you can add all sorts of ugly doodads like spoilers, tail fins and hopefully neon running lights.

Nothing like Canada in the Fall

While *Need for Speed* can't show damage on their precious sports cars (it's a licensing issue), *Speed Busters* can crunch, mangle and chomp their metallic bodies to little bits, and the damage affects the car's handling.

The game will ship with seven cars and six tracks, plus some hidden ones. As with their game *Pod*, additional cars will be made available on UbiSoft's website. The tracks are set in various North American locations, and each has a number of incidental animations (the usual helicopter taking off, a giant dinosaur on the Hollywood track in California). You'll also be able to drive on moving objects, such as a secret shortcut on one track where you use a jump to land on a moving train.

Ice, ice baby

The game will support many Internet play options, and UbiSoft will offer a free net matchmaking service. As with 3D shooters, the game will allow players to create and download skins for the cars so they'll be visually distinctive in multiplayer races. Additionally, they'll be able to be add new horn sounds to annoy friends and neighbors, which is truly a frightening thought.

Speed Busters is scheduled to crash onto your PC in late October. *–Steve Bauman*

Speed Busters • UbiSoft • Windows 95

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FIRST LOOK THE GENERAL AVIATION sim market (i.e., flight games what ain't got no guns in 'em) has been shifting lately; for the longest time monopolized by *Microsoft Flight Simulator* (gee, go figure) with Looking Glass' *Flight Unlimited* flitting about in the niche fringes, this lucrative area has begun to attract the attention of others. Last year Sierra released their problem child *Pro Pilot* (being followed this year by *Pro Pilot '99*), and now Gathering of Developers has signed up Terminal Reality's *Fly!*

Baby's got buttons... and knobs, and dials, and readouts. Realistic cockpits aim to make instrument fliers salivate

From what Terminal Reality is saying, it looks like they are aiming duplicate both the broad coverage of *Flight Simulator* and the detailed graphics of *Flight Unlimited*. Fans of the former will appreciate such features as an interactive air traffic control system (including voice support), detailed avionics, global positioning system-based navigation, what are claimed to be accurate flight models, and support for expansion aircraft, cockpits, and scenery (they may put out an editor tool of some sort after the game ships).

Aspects targeting *Flight Unlimited* groupies include: graphics support ranging from 640x480 and 16 bit color (on systems with 4 MB 3D cards) to resolutions and color depths limited only by system memory (and your monitor), and five "primary scenery areas" 100 by 100 miles square, with detailed satellite-imagery textures (25 meter LANDSAT with some 5 meter in spots; the rest of the world will be more generically modeled). Current plans call for three single prop, two dual prop, and one small jet in the initial package, and multiplayer and force feedback are both going to be supported. *–Scott Udell*

Fly! • Terminal Reality • Windows 95, MacOS

edutainment software giant, now owns Red Orb Entertainment as well as Mindscape and SSI, acquired earlier this year from Pearson... **Secret Ops Deployment Plans**—Origin began posting the first episodes of ***Wing Commander: Secret Ops*** on the Internet. For those cringing at the initial 56-114 MB download, Origin said it will release *Secret Ops* along with *Wing Commander Prophecy Gold* later this year... **WarCraft Petition**—Blizzard addressed a growing petition movement by fans looking to persuade the company to resurrect the canceled ***WarCraft Adventures***. While Blizzard appreciated the effort, the company said that it had other plans for the popular *WarCraft* series and asked that fans trust its judgment on the game's cancellation...■

Terminus

Flying the multiplayer skies

Fire? In space?

FIRST LOOK IF YOU RECALL OUR May cover story on the game then referred to as *Privateer 3*, you heard about a wonderful-sounding multiplayer and single-player experience. Well, it's unlikely that the next *Privateer* will be the product covered in that article (it's currently being "reworked"), but developer Vicarious Visions has a game called *Terminus* which eerily mimics its feature-set. It's an outer-space combat game with true Newtonian Physics, 3D accelerated graphics, a dynamically changing real-time universe, real-time voice in multiplayer and detailed multiplayer play.

The fiction of the game posits a world in the year 2197. People are brawling, borders are in flux, people are flying around in space ships shooting each other and trading—the usual stuff. You start the game with a hull of a craft and follow whatever path your little heart desires. Of note is the flight model of your craft—you have six thrusters that are used to push your ship in any direction, with the hull moving independently.

Got it lined up in my sights...

While there have been games like this before, from *Privateer* to the legendary *Elite*, Vicarious Visions is hoping their multiplayer component takes them to the next level. As with *Privateer 3*, players will be allowed to set up servers that run the real-time universe, the same one that's used to generate missions in the solo game. Basically, the server runs the economy, populates the world with non-player characters, sets up trade routes (ripe for exploitation), and tracks all of the people who log in and out of the server. Players keep their character on the server and can pursue whatever role in the universe they wish. They can join the military and fight pirates. Or they can be the pirates. Or they can trade, build up money and become a ship broker, selling off fancy ships to pilots who aren't interested in building their own.

Currently scheduled for completion later this year, Vicarious Visions is in discussions with various companies to publish the game. Expect to see it on shelves in early 1999. *–Steve Bauman*

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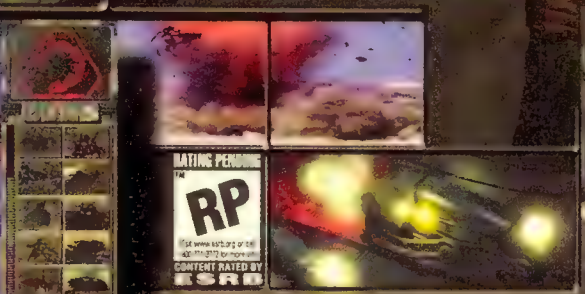

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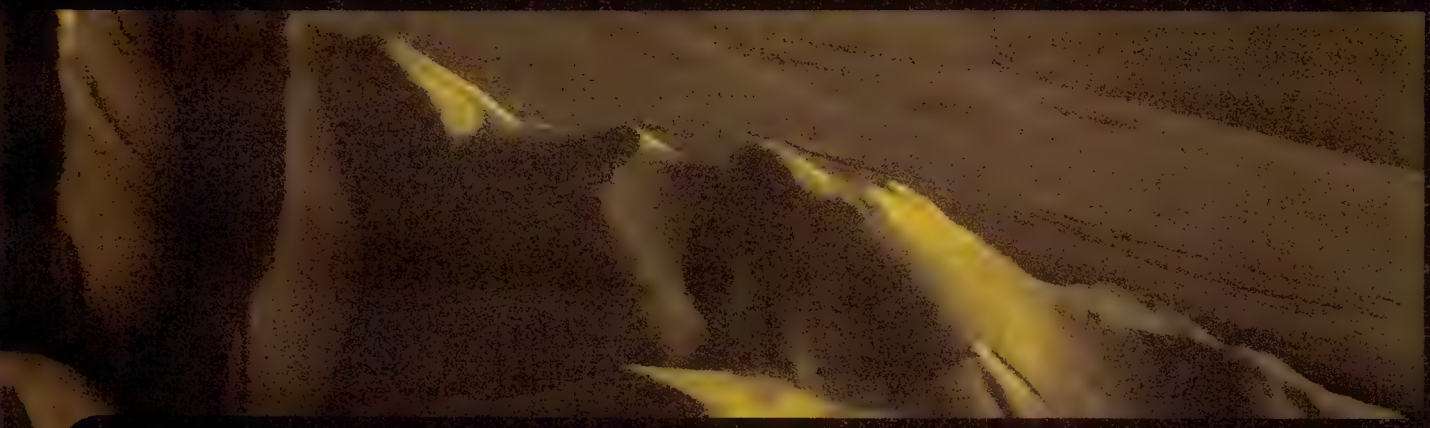

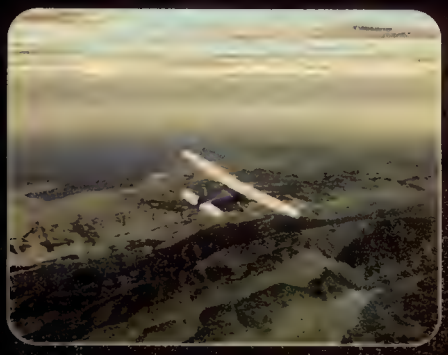

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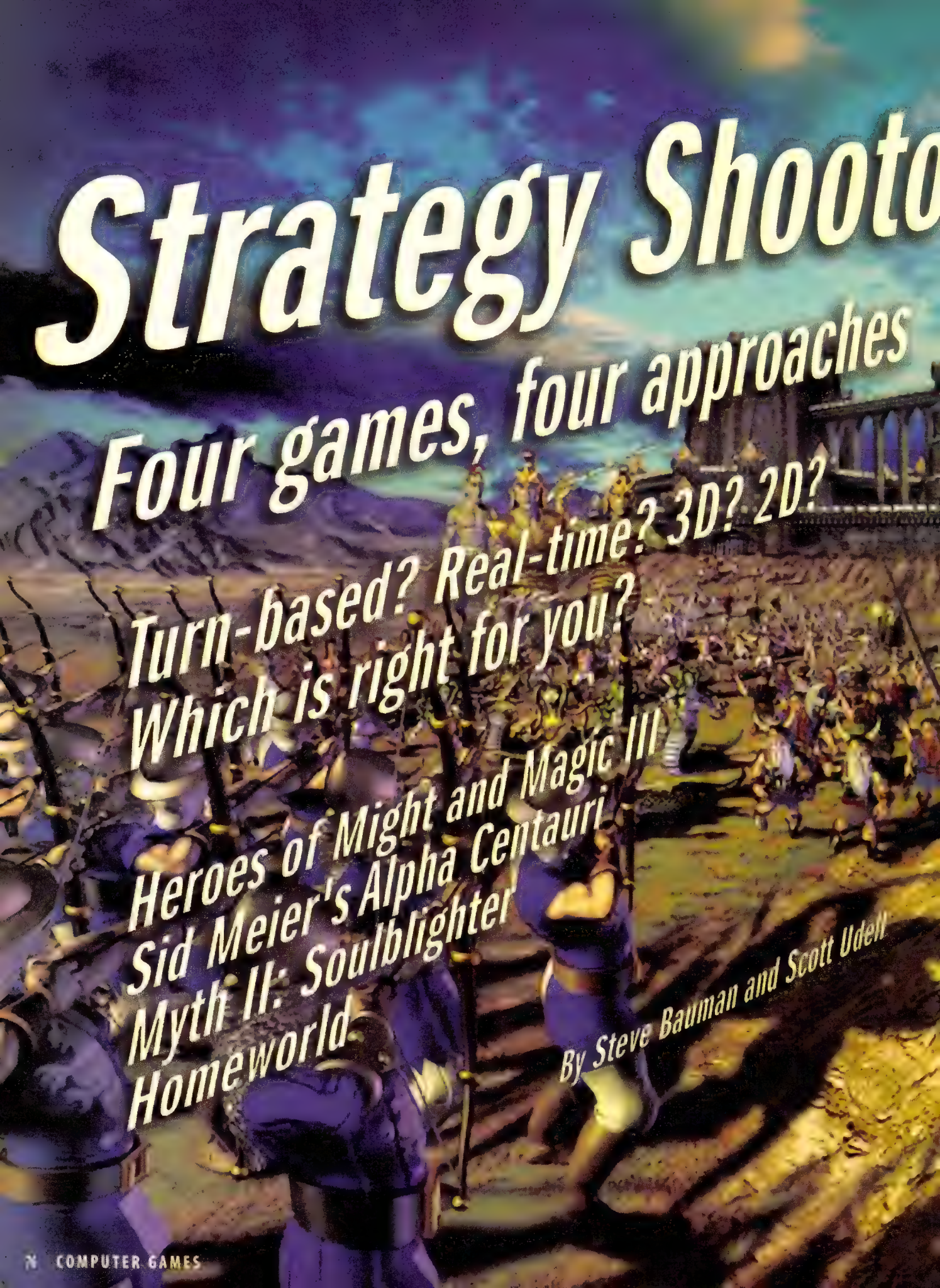


Strategy Shooto

Four games, four approaches

Turn-based? Real-time? 3D? 2D? Which is right for you?

Heroes of Might and Magic III
Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri
Myth II: Soulblighter
Homeworld

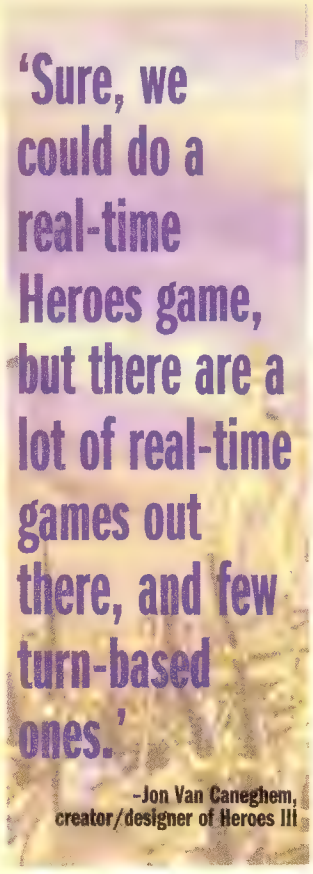
By Steve Bauman and Scott Udell

Myth II: Soulblighter and Heroes III

yth: The Fallen Lords garnered this magazine's "Game of the Year" award for 1997 as well as numerous other accolades (excepting the award Bungie probably would have liked above all others—sales in the *Command & Conquer* realm). With a sequel in the works, we took a trip out to Bungie's new digs in downtown Chicago to take a look at what they have brewing and to talk about the approach they have taken to strategy gaming.

On the polar side of the gameplay spectrum, the award-winning *Heroes of Might and Magic* series is up to its third iteration, and it's taking the approach that the first sequel took: it's a careful evolution of the series, not a complete rethinking or redesign. "I'd rather [gamers] say they wanted more from the game than put in something that ruins the balance," admits Jon Van Caneghem, president of New World and creator/designer of *Heroes III* and the entire *Might and Magic* series.

We decided to pit these two games against each other in one article because… because… well, OK, so maybe they don't *really* compete against one another in the marketplace. However, both are sequels, one turn-based and one real-time, to fantasy strategy games with very devoted fans, and we want to explore what their evolution will mean to today's strategy player.


'Sure, we could do a real-time Heroes game, but there are a lot of real-time games out there, and few turn-based ones.'
-Jon Van Caneghem, creator/designer of Heroes III

The olde days

Ye Olde Strategy Game used to be turn-based and flat 2D; sprites moved across the screen like cardboard counters moved across map boards of yore. Then came *Warcraft* and *Command & Conquer* and their ilk, and real-time was popularized (ignoring for the moment their predecessors); however, aside from the Mindscape's *Warhammer* game *Shadow of the Horned Rat*, the world was still flat. The original *Myth* broke out of 2D into a rotateable 3D world; now not only could you scroll the map, you could spin it as well, and 3D objects and terrain relief added to the problems you faced.

It's fair, though, to ask why go 3D? "We found that it definitely introduces a lot of issues into the game," says *Myth II* lead programmer Jason Regier. "Not necessarily problems, but there are a lot of things you think of. It's always been our feeling that it makes it that much more real." Tuncer Deniz, Producer, adds, "It adds a whole new element to the gameplay; it's not very easy to control and play the game, something we were aware of since the beginning of *Myth*. It's like you either try to innovate or you try to do something a lot of other people are doing, and it's definitely a give and take, a risk."

Regier believes they choose correctly. "Looking at the stuff that came out at [the Electronic Entertainment Expo in Atlanta this past May]. I think it's cool to see that we definitely made a lot of the right choices," he says. "I saw a ton of games there that took that 3D camera and used it; it was very nice to see that we pushed things forward in the right direction."

Real-time Heroes?

The most obvious way the turn-based *Heroes of Might and Magic* series could have evolved was to go the *Command & Conquer* route. "Sure, we could do a real-time *Heroes* game," Van Caneghem hypothesizes, "but there are a lot of real-time games out there, and few turn-based ones."

Another way to do a sequel is to throw new technology, like 3D, at the product, an approach eschewed by the *Heroes III* team. "We rely more on the gameplay than the bells and whistles to sell the game for us," admits Van Caneghem. "It's tougher to get that across, but it's far more satisfying."

There's also another reason: "You want to preserve the basic gameplay, and technology is going to affect that severely." In other words, there is no new zippy 3D engine, no polygonal units, no rotatable map—just the same visual style, with some improvements, seen in the other games in the series. The game is receiving a minor facelift, supporting a higher-resolution (800x600 instead of 640x480) and greater color depth (now 16-bit, 65,000 color vs. 8-bit, 256 color). The in-game graphics are pre-rendered in 3D software instead of hand drawn, and the shockingly bright color palette has been toned down somewhat. Fortunately, New World heeded the cries of the masses and will use a combination of rendered and heavily altered digitized characters instead of the oft-mocked photos used for characters in *Might and Magic VI*.

From legions to squads

Myth, while called a "real time strategy" (RTS) game, is really more a game of tactics. (Bungie's Doug Zartman admits they wrestled with the issue of whether to call *Myth* strategic or tactical, but in the end felt that "tactical" was too fuzzy a term, and not as marketable.) You don't build bases and continuously crank out new units, but you do fight. You don't have swarms of units, you have individuals you have to use smartly, positioning them according to their strengths (and weaknesses). Its approach to working you into the story is different; instead of starting you out in command of the whole army, you are plopped into a situation a fantasy non-com might face, and then built up from there.

Because they dropped the "strategic" portions of gameplay to focus on the tactical fighting, the game actually requires good tactics. While you can use the typical RTS approach of selecting all your troops and sending them into battle in a gaggle, you'll lose; to win, you have to organize your troops into formations, position them on the appropriate terrain, and move them in a coordinated fashion. This is a complex business, especially in 3D, and wasn't made any easier by the "dreaded gesture click" (Bungie's phrasing, not ours), a mechanism by which you gave a group an orientation as well as a location when issuing a movement order. Once you made the transition from the RTS-style of gameplay to this "RTT" style, the game was a blast, but Bungie freely admits that that transition was harder than it should have been, something they aim to fix in *Myth II*.

Crafting a sequel

It's not easy to do a sequel. On one hand, you want to introduce new features that didn't make it into earlier games plus implement requests from fans. You also need to give people enough new stuff to make people feel an entirely new product is justified. This is all balanced against the possibility that new features will alienate those same fans or alter the game's precious balance.

Instead of just releasing an expansion to the original game, Bungie decided to go whole-hog and do a new game. "New," of course, is relative; if you've played the first *Myth* the second will, at first glance, look much like its predecessor. You still have the same angled view on the battlefield and units are still sprite-based—no free-flying cameras or polygonal characters in this update. This is not to say it's just more of the same—the team is doing plenty new, both "under the hood" and in up-front gameplay—but the core style is carried forward.

The story continues that set up in the first game. In *Myth* you did in Balor, and with his passing the Fallen Lords fell apart. Most were hunted down and eliminated, but of course one, Soulblighter, survived to bring woe to the land. After a 60 year interregnum in which he quietly built up his power (you know, robbing a grave here, forming a band of brigands there), Soulblighter's ready to… do something, and that's where the game starts. As with *Myth*, you won't start out right at the center of a massive conflict; rather, the story will build through the missions, getting you closer to the key action and, conveniently, involved in ever more difficult battles. Bungie gave us a copy of the tentative storyline, but we won't go into further details (aside from ruining the surprises, Bungie's wrath would make even a Trow quake in fear). Needless to say there are some interesting twists and turns; for example, expect to see some old foes made into new friends, and be ready for some missions somewhat… different from those you might anticipate.

Much like *Myth II*, *Heroes of Might and Magic III* retains most of the flavor of its previous iterations. Yes, it's still a turn-based strategy game, retaining the same basic interface and game mechanics as the previous two versions. The three campaigns are story-based, and are of varying lengths. Players of *Might and Magic VI* may remember that Queen Catherine had left Enroth to attend her father's funeral in Erathia. It turns out that the land over which he lorded is under siege from various neighborhood bullies. Catherine needs to commission the land's greatest heroes to restore peace, eventually solving the mystery behind the king's death. You start each mission with a specific goal, a large unexplored map and a need to deploy your heroes across the land, fighting monsters and taking over enemy or neutral towns.

In addition to the main campaign, there will be a slew of individual and multiplayer-specific scenarios such as one-on-one, king of the hill and co-op. As *Heroes III* is a turn-based game, there is a lot of downtime in these multiplayer scenarios, especially when the new eight-player games are being played. To help combat this, New World has added a feature that allows players to check their own towns and units while waiting for opponents to complete their turn.

Beyond the technology

While *Myth II* isn't a whole new game design, there's plenty new or changed programming-wise. Regier says no part of the code has been left untouched; input and sound were both ripped out an replaced, much of the graphics and AI (especially pathfinding) code has been redone, and so forth. A lot of this work is to give us "more" in the game.

For example, the underlying terrain mesh, the tiny grid of polygons that the actual image of the terrain lies on top of, is four times finer, which

means they can have much more detail on the maps, giving us things like ruts in roads or furrows in fields. Different terrain types now have a more significant effect on gameplay, particularly the movement of your units (believe it or not, units didn't move any slower in water in *Myth* than on land). The maps won't be physically larger, but they may feel bigger; in part this is because many maps will have more exaggerated terrain relief (so that pass will feel like a mountain pass instead of a draw between two hills), and it's also because units will be just a tad smaller.

The number and complexity of objects on the terrain has increased as well. Instead of just a few simple four sided houses and a bridge or two, you may see complete castles with battlements and working drawbridges. While visually more interesting, these also play a big role in many missions, and give players experiences they didn't get in the first game: you've got to get into a castle, but the drawbridge is up—what to do? You're used to fighting across open fields, but the objective in that multiplayer map is in the middle of a fairly large village, so you've got to learn city fighting now, and what's that do to the gameplay? There are even some missions that take place inside structures, something that really adds a new twist to the typical merriment (trash the house like you always *really* wanted to as a kid).

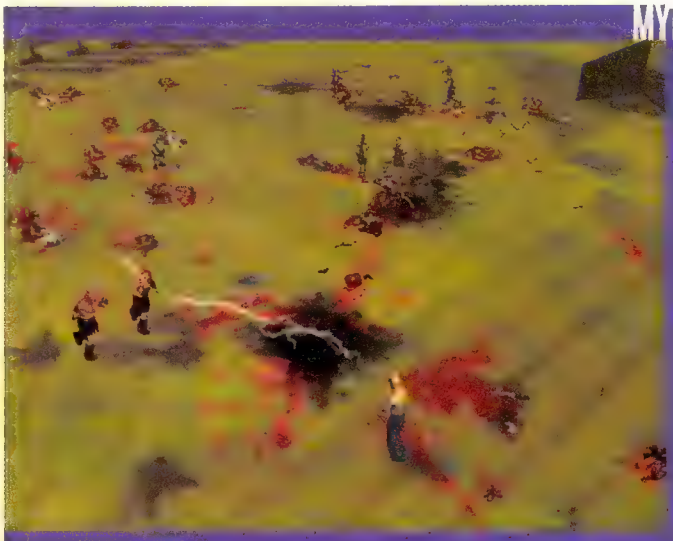
Environmental effects are being expanded, and again they'll play a part in the gameplay. Set a tree on fire—ooh, it looks pretty, right? Yup, but while you're oogling the cool effect, that fire is spreading and you've just lost your dwarves to it. (Understandably, fire will make an excellent weapon when employed correctly.) All these effects, however, won't be over done or over used—you won't see lens flare or colored lighting up the wazoo; Regier proudly states, "Our trademark is subtlety and attention to detail" (flying body parts are subtle? Well, you know what he means…).

As mentioned, the sound has been totally redone. In place of the first game's monaural sound effects, *Myth II*'s will be directional, and (if you've got the hardware) they'll make use of things like environmental extensions to add reverb. They are also working on adding low-key Redbook audio (music played off the CD), but it will be situational, so no pastoral tunes in the midst of battles or dirges when you've got the enemy on the run.

Units and magic are also getting attention. They haven't shared a lot of details about new units, but there will be some; both the Light and Dark sides are getting a new magic user, and you can expect to see some other new characters. Still, they couldn't ditch everything from the first game; says Regier, "We have to bring some units back because there has to be some consistency between the first [game] and this one." Many old favorites are getting functional facelifts. For example, the dwarves now carry a knife that they can use as a last ditch defense, and archers are smarter and can shoot fire arrows. All of the units have been re-rendered with more polygons for more detail, and all will have more varieties of animation—the goal is to make them look less like little fantasy robots and more like soldiers and creatures

The lands of *Myth* were fairly empty, but *Myth II* will feature many more ambient creatures, things like chickens, cows, goats, and wolves. (Note that last one: not all critters will be domesticated, so you'd better keep careful watch on your army when moving through the wilds lest stragglers get turned into snacks.) While *Myth II* is still mostly a game of combat, magic is getting a bit more attention. New spells include Cloudkill and Fireball (yeah! Gotta love those fireballs no matter what game they're in), and as mentioned there will be some new magic users. In addition, the mana used to cast spells will replenish over time, so if your conventional fighters can hold off the hordes your specialty units may get in some more magical licks.

MYTH II



Fetches make a mess

Aww, man, I hate it when that happens!

The Dark forces punch right into the center of Light's line

Hmm, should we leave the gates open?

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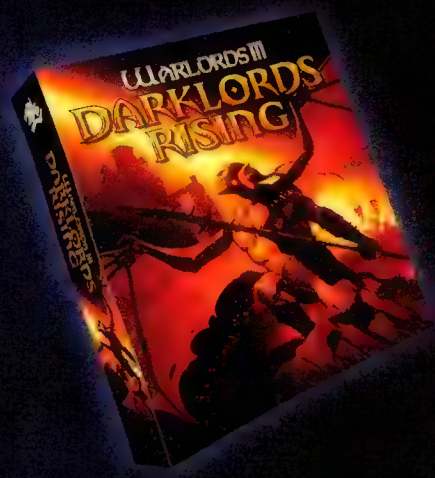

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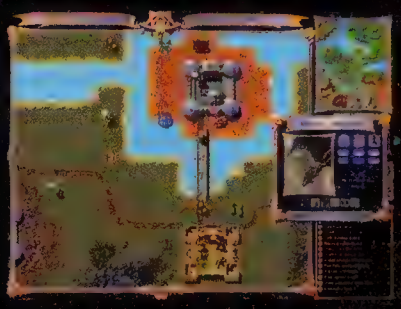

Welcome to *Darklords Rising*, the greatly anticipated sequel to *Warlords III: Reign of Heroes*, 1997's turn-based strategy game of the year.

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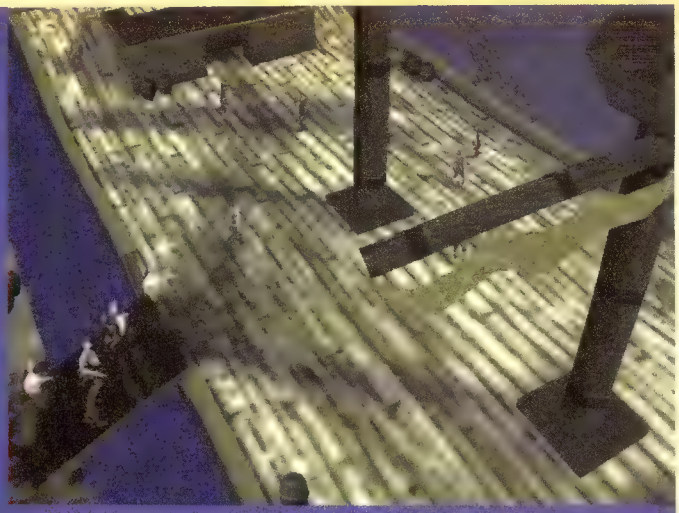
WARLORDS III
DARKLORDS RISING

The evil Baron and his Undead guard



Bring Alric to safety! The boat is many 3D objects glued together

More, more, and more

New World is adding a few dollops of more, more and more to *Heroes III*. As the game takes place in a new setting, Erathia, there are eight new town types, all with their own sets of buildings and units they can produce. In a reversal from the original games, the towns now define the type of hero that can be recruited, and two hero classes will be available per town (see the chart below).

Inevitably you'll encounter opposing forces, and once that happens the game switches to another screen where the battle is played out. The combat remains a turn-based affair where you issue orders and watch them play out. These sequences could be described as a chess match with fantasy characters, and in *Heroes III* you essentially have more pieces to spread across the larger board. There are twice the number of hexes on which to deploy your units and there are around 59 creatures, each with an upgrade, resulting in a total of 118. New additions are creatures from *Might and Magic VI*, the most terrifying being a variation of those damn floating eyeballs that terrorized players in Kriegspire.

Each of your heroes has a set of skills and magic ability. This particular aspect of the game has received a tune-up, mostly with features brought over from *Might and Magic VI*. As an example, you can cast fly spells to speed your travel across the landscape. The skill system has been modified to allow secondary skills: Van Caneghem gives an example of one, the battle tactics skill; it allows you to place creatures on the battle screen before the skirmish begins. As you improve the skill via use, you can place units up to halfway across the map. According to Van Caneghem, all of the changes to combat were designed to allow more strategic maneuvering and to give terrain more importance in combat. Spells, for example, can now be used to destroy and make obstacles in battle.

There are more artifacts—objects that provide benefits, or an occasional detriment, to your hero—to discover on your journeys. They are now equipped on heroes via a paper-doll system that should be familiar to fans of *Might and Magic VI*. Perhaps under the influence of *Final Fantasy VII*, artifacts can be used in tandem, resulting in even greater benefits. These changes were done to eliminate one common strategy in the previous games. "The basic strategy was to make one super hero, but the more we can defuse that strategy the better," says Van Caneghem. "You really need multiple good heroes vs. the one good one. The paper doll system forces you to spread out artifacts. You can only equip one sword or shield artifact."

A balancing act

There's a fine balance between too much combat and giving the player too little to do, and the previous *Heroes of Might and Magic* games were beautifully balanced. "We've always wanted to make sure that you don't get bogged down in town screen, or in the adventure side of the game. It's really a balance of how far you can move in a turn, and how many encounters you could do, plus the density of creatures."

If you don't like their balance, you can always tweak it yourself. While Van Caneghem is against allowing players to modify individual unit stats, saying it alters the basic game too much, the game will still include the simple-to-use but powerful level editor.

The game's AI has also received some tweaks, including a computer player that will upgrade and replace units it has garrisoned in towns. Van Caneghem is most proud of the AI when it's faced with user-designed maps. "Even with bad maps, the AI manages to hold together."

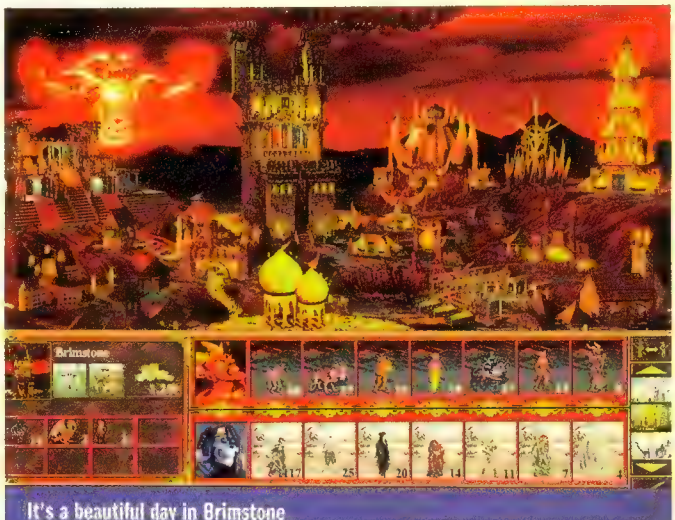
Death to gesture click!

If the first *Myth* had any complaint leveled against it, it was that many found it too hard: the missions were difficult from the get-go and the

The Heroes of Heroes III

Each of the town types will allow you to recruit heroes that are classified as either might or magic. Here's a tentative list of the towns and types of heroes for each.

Town Type	Magic Hero	Might Hero
Castle	Cleric	Knight
Rampart	Druid	Ranger
Tower	Wizard	Alchemist
Inferno	Pagan	Heretic
Necropolis	Necromancer	Death Knight
Dungeon	Warlock	Overlord
Stronghold	Battle Mage	Barbarian
Fortress	Witch	Beastmaster



It's a beautiful day in Brimstone

'Our number one goal was [making it so] that users could optionally play with only the mouse.'

control scheme was hard to master. Bungie's listened and has acknowledged they made some mistakes, perhaps the key one being that they did only a single round of beta-testing for the solo player portion of the game, and that most of the people involved in that were really hardcore gamers. They have either already implemented or have planed a number of improvements, across the board.

Tutorial missions will be more involved and will take you further in the gameplay; the early campaign missions won't be as tough; and many interface improvements have been or are being made. They've said that "Our number one goal was [making it so] that users could optionally play with only the mouse." Notice that "optionally" part; for those who had no trouble with the original schemes, they'll still be available (they wouldn't want to alienate fans). The "gesture-click" scheme is being enhanced with a method that lets you use the arrow keys to indicate the direction, units can be turned by just clicking and dragging the mouse in the direction you want them to face, and formations can now pass through other formations more readily.

For multiplayer fans, bungie.net 2.0 is being developed alongside *Myth II*, and it too features many improvements: it'll be easier to find friends online, you'll be able to search on the kind of game you would like to play (the team jokingly refers to this as their "game wizard"—you enter the parameters and off it goes), there will be more screen real-estate for things like chat windows, and *Myth* Clans will be better supported.

To sequel or not–that is the question

In movies or books, we don't expect our sequels to be radically different (can you see *Saving Private Ryan II* as a comedy?), but neither do we want them to be complete rehashes or, even worse, the same thing just put into a different order. The same is true for our games (or should be), and from where we stand, it looks like Bungie is striking the right balance in the *Myth* universe, which is all we can ask.

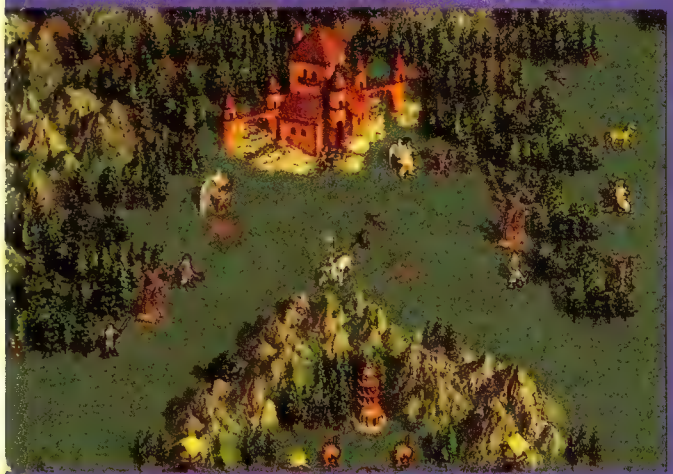
As for *Heroes III*, in an industry of stultifying me-too sameness, where technical merits are often promoted over good design and gameplay, the series has always managed to stand out by being old-school.

Whether a strategy game is 2D, 3D, turn-based or real-time is ultimately irrelevant—fans of the genre care more about whether or not the game delivers an entertaining, challenging and intellectually stimulating experience than if it has the same features as *Command & Conquer* (or not). When considering the previous versions of both of these games, it's a testament to the flexibility of what we generically refer to as the strategy genre that two as disparate as these receive near-equal adulation from both the press and gamers throughout the world. Here's hoping that successfully diverse products such as these show companies there's more to strategy gaming than wave after wave of clones.

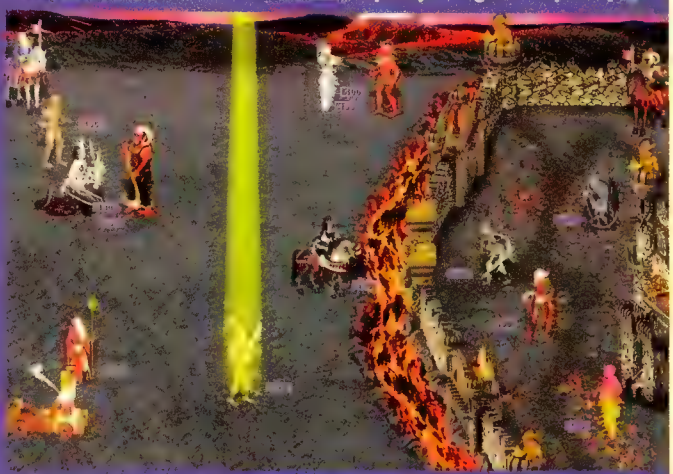
HEROES III

The town screens have received a touch-up. They look mighty impressive...

The new combat screen has more boxes, hopefully adding more depth of play

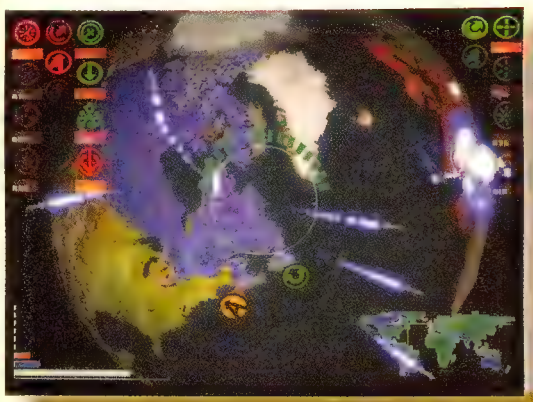


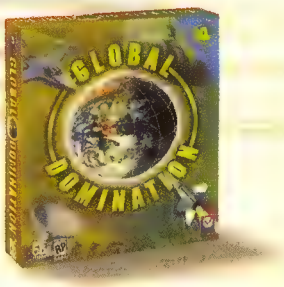
The new adventure screen shows off the slightly modified new look



The new rendered units are impressive

58 Million SNOBS is way too many





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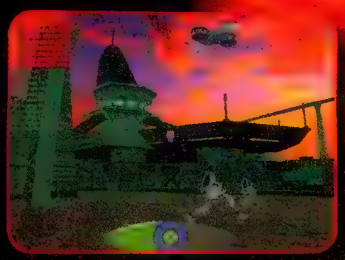

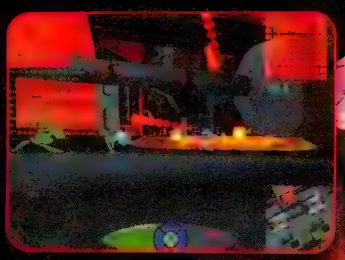

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Strategy Shootout!!!

Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri & Homeworld

Unless you're a fan of sci-fi television, when you hear "Starbuck" you probably think of coffee or *Moby Dick*. The cognoscenti, however, remember that Starbuck was one of the characters of the late '70s TV show, *Battlestar Galactica*. Kind of a mixture of *Star Wars*' Han Solo and Luke Skywalker, he and his cohorts were making an epic journey across space, searching for a lost colony to call home and fighting all the way. Now, Starbuck was in essence a space fighter pilot, and we've all seen plenty of games that let us fly in the cockpit of some futuristic dogfighter, but how many have longed to play the role of Lorne Green's Commander Adama, the military leader of the fleet? Sure, there have been a number of space strategy games where you get to command a fleet, but few that have really captured the feel of an epic space battle, especially one where you get to use that all-important third dimension. Sierra and Vancouver, B.C.-based developer Relic Entertainment aim to address that lack in their upcoming *Homeworld*.

From a developer new to strategy gaming we switch to one of the best-regarded teams in the business… only to find a game with a somewhat similar backstory: A group of people, fleeing tragedy and death, are united by one goal: to set up a new home for humanity on a habitable planet in the Alpha Centauri star system, a safe haven where the troubles of the past can be left behind and a new future charted. At least, that's the way they start…. On the long journey outward from the Sol System fractures appear and factions form. Instead of the carefully planned, methodically executed survey and landing that was supposed to happen, the factions begin rushing planet-side with whatever they can carry or send. Each will find itself alone in a wilderness with only the raw basics of a colony, facing a new world with other equally lonely and fearful (yet inimical) colonists and unknown dangers far beyond petty human concerns. This, in short, is the situation at the beginning of *Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri*, coming to us care of Firaxis Games.

Homeworld is the newcomer that grabbed plenty of attention at this year's Electronic Entertainment Expo, while *Alpha Centauri*, a game grown from the minds that brought us both *Civilization* games, has just plain grabbed attention. *Homeworld* is all new while *Alpha Centauri* is—in spirit at least—a sequel to *Civilization*; *Homeworld* is 3D and real-time while *Alpha Centauri* is 2D and turn-based; *Homeworld* is strategy gaming "Pop" to *Alpha Centauri*'s "Classical."

"Oh give me a home..."

The storyline of *Homeworld* is still largely under wraps at this point, but the basic plot shares many similarities with *Battlestar Galactica*. In the single-player game you are the leader of a group of people looking for your lost homeworld. In the distant past your people were part of an advanced, peaceful race, sitting happily astride the space lanes at the center of a rich galaxy. Like *Battlestar Galactica*, a conquering race came in and booted you out, but unlike the show you lost completely, and the remnants of your people were carted off to the distant edge of your galaxy and left there (apparently you weren't just wiped out because your enemies knew you were needed for the story…).

Hundreds of years pass and your origins are almost forgotten when an Artifact is uncovered, an ancient item which hints of and points you towards your lost homeworld. So you do what any sensible race would do: you build a massive mothership to carry your millions and form the core of a fleet and you take off in search of your heritage. Of course, your enemies don't think much of this development and will fight you all

Homeworld: A relatively small fleet enters a new sector

Alpha Centauri: The Gaians aim to work with the new planet instead of against it

Ka-WHOOM! Our destroyers and frigates, guarding the mother ship on the right, take out an opponent

The sensor manager view is your "overhead" map of the sector you're in, albeit one that can be fully rotated

Following a pack of light interceptors as they zoom in on an enemy ship. The little "ion trails" from each ship aid in keeping track of them when zoomed out

along the way in a series of battles (pssst—that means missions); *voila*! Houston, we have game.

Real-time and 3D

Alex Garden, CEO of Relic, is a fan of space battles, the bigger the better. When talking with him, you hear frequent references to *Battlestar Galactica*, *Star Wars*, and even *Wing Commander*. As a gamer he's played many of the 3D space shooters, but he doesn't feel they capture the feel of a big battle. So he decided to make his own space combat game. When asked why he decided to go the real-time 3D route, he replied, "There's no sort of design philosophy behind it. The fact that it's real-time strategy was almost a fluke. The focus was making sure the space combat ruled."

Despite the game's real-time strategy (RTS) underpinnings, it certainly *looks* like a space combat game, especially if you happen to attach your view to one of your smaller craft; nevertheless, it *isn't* a space flight sim—you'll never touch a joystick, but you'll certainly make use of your mouse as you work through the amazingly-familiar-yet-surprisingly-different RTS conventions: gather, research, build, fight, repeat. "To be perfectly honest," says Garden, "we really didn't make a lot improvements over the standard RTS model because that's not what we set out to do."

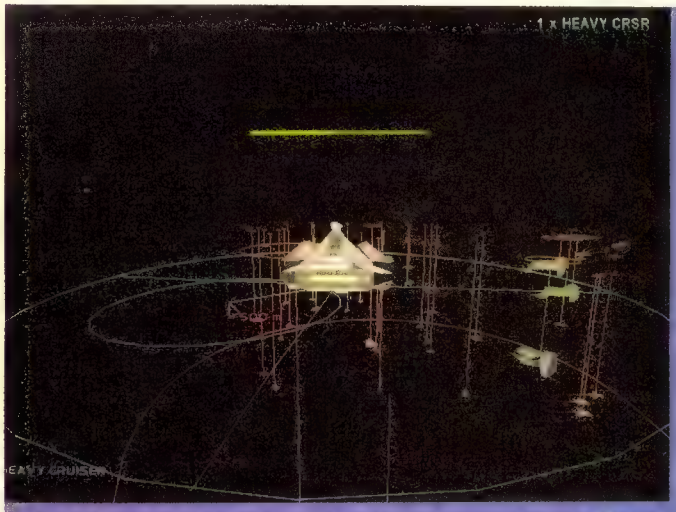
Instead, they moved the traditional RTS model into 3D space, completely unhinging your "base" (your mothership and other key capital ships) from fixed positions. At the start of a mission/scenario, your mothership arrives in a new sector, dropping out of hyperspace with the rest of the fleet. (In build of the game used for this article, the campaign was only partially implemented, and Garden indicated that it was still receiving a lot of attention, but right now other ships in the fleet move with you from previous sectors.) You can only see the area around your fleet, so the first thing you'll probably do is send out fast scouts and probes, both to find resources and to locate the enemy.

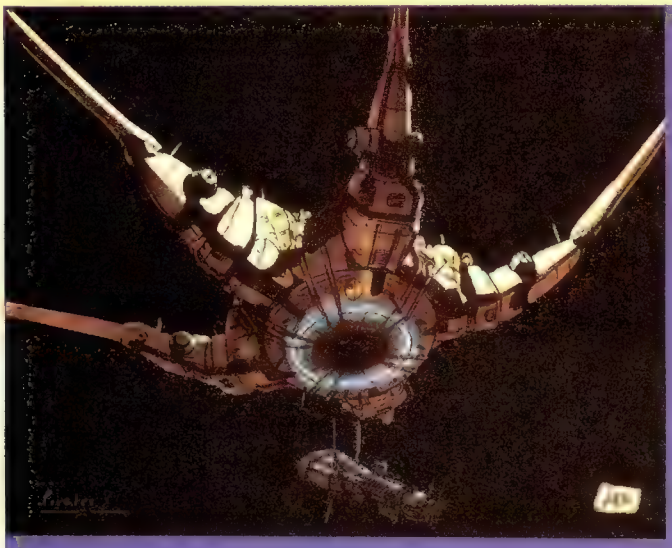
Your big ships generate their own fuel, but are very, very slow, while your smaller vessels and fighters need to be refueled (let them run out and they'll drift out of control). Fuel comes from resources (asteroids, gas clouds, etc), so the larger your fleet the more you'll need; even if you clean the enemy out of a sector you'll eventual need to move on lest you run out of supplies (this is a clever way of forcing you to move to the next mission—no sitting around researching everything and building up a massive fleet). Before the battle is joined perhaps you'll have time to collect some resources, or to conduct some research on your research ship, or to repair any damage left from battle in the last sector, or to build some new ships in your mothership (particularly if new technologies become available). Eventually, though, battle will occur, and that's where the meat of the game is.

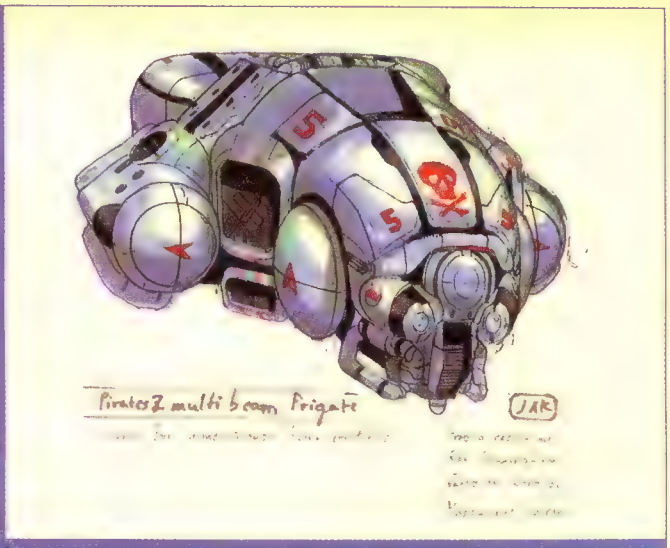
Battle me this

Depending on how you've deployed your fleet and on how the AI has been scripted (or how your opponent is maneuvering if you're playing multiplayer), you may either run smack dab into your enemy's fleet or fight many smaller skirmishes. Generally, you'll want to arrange your fleet like you would an ocean-going naval armada, with your critical assets towards the center surrounded by smaller auxiliary vessels on the periphery and clouds of interceptors, bombers, and other fighter-like craft constantly patrolling the fringes.

Of course, you've got three dimensions to worry about, which may sound worrisome at first—how does one maintain "situational awareness"? Relic's done several things to help keep gamers from getting lost







Homeworld's concept art

'The whole diplomacy aspect is huge. I guess we put more effort into that than anything else.'

–Jeff Briggs, President of Firaxis

in space. First, your view is always attached to something; while you can zoom in and out, spin around a center point, or switch your center point to another object or group, you can never completely detach your camera from an anchoring item, so it's difficult to end up looking into the screen and having no idea what direction you're facing (although attaching yourself to a fighter can be confusing… but a lot of fun). Also, like in most every sci-fi movie or TV show you've seen, all the ships of *Homeworld* orient themselves by an "up" and "down," and much of the action takes place on a plane. This is not, however, to say you can't make use of 3D space; indeed, the wily commander will often order his or her ships on sweeping out-of-plane maneuvers, and will be prepared to expect an enemy to do the same.

Control of ships is like in other RTS games; click on an individual or lasso (drag-select) a group and issue your commands. Order can be issued when the game is paused and they are context sensitive based on the type of ship selected, making it impossible, say, to order fighters to collect resources. You can order units to attack an enemy by selecting them and clicking on the target. Right click on your selected ship(s) and you can pick from a menu of other orders (all of which will have keyboard equivalents): movement, docking (for small ships without hyperspace drives), aggressiveness, and formations. Formations are particularly interesting, especially since they're "smart." If you tell a group of interceptors to form a sphere, they'll cluster in a tight ball, but if you tell that group and, say, a carrier to form a sphere, the fighters will form a larger ball with the high-value carrier at the center. You may also order ships to guard other vessels, and certain ships can be directed to conduct special operations (like the Light Corvette and it's "burst attack").

Cohesion

Luckily for gamers, the team at Firaxis is nothing like the colonists in their game; instead, the small group (some 17 people) seem united in their vision for *Alpha Centauri*. For example, when we dropped by their Hunt Valley, Maryland offices in August, Sid Meier (creator of the *Civilization* series and the creative center around which much attention focuses) was out on vacation and Brian Reynolds, *Alpha Centauri*'s designer and lead programmer, had taken ill. However, Jeff Briggs, President of Firaxis, and Tim Train, the game's producer, were able to jump right in and field any questions, be they broad-based queries about the overall design or very specific questions about detailed portions of the game; they even answered some questions nearly identically. Fortunately Brian recovered in time to provide answers to a few questions before we went to press.

When Firaxis press literature on *Alpha Centauri* refers obliquely to "other games from this team," they are of course talking mostly about the two *Civilization* games published by MicroProse. Many of the team

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Actual gameplay screen shot

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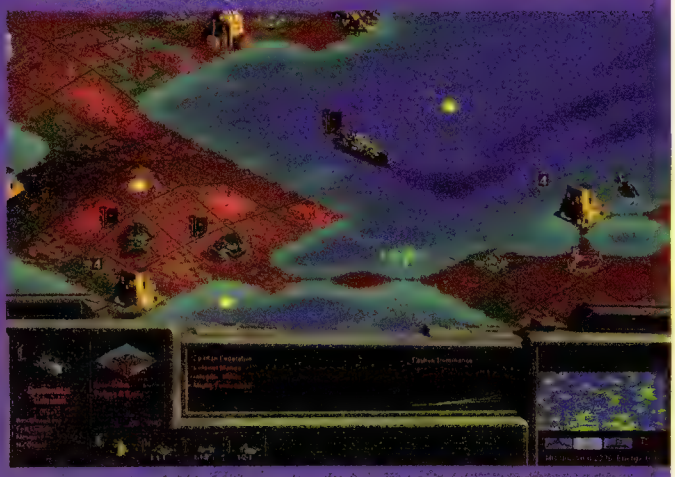
This slightly zoomed out view shows a world rich in life

An example of the revamped interface

The Planetary Council, the mechanism by which you get the really big projects done



This close-up shows details of the terrain. Each faction has different architecture, so it's easy to see your enemies and your friends

members—and all the leads—worked on that series, leading to the inevitable question, "Is *Alpha Centauri* just *Civilization*-in-space?" As you might expect, the answer is a little bit of yes and no.

Civilization in space?

In response to the question, Briggs explains that the game is "*Civilization*-like in the sense that it's a turn-base strategy game in which you build bases." Note the turn-based part; Reynolds didn't go real-time for *Alpha Centauri*, not because Firaxis is opposed to that style of game (*Sid Meier's Gettysburg* is a case in point) but because of the scope of this particular title; says Briggs, "It's a question of scale more than anything else."

Also like *Civilization II*, the team is using a 2D view on the world instead of following the 3D trend. Again, this ties in with the scale of the game, which is global—truly strategic, unlike many other "strategy" games. It also relates to the team's desire to make the game accessible to a wider audience, including those with lower-end systems (Train's been able to run early versions on a 90MHz laptop). While the graphics are improved over *Civilization II* and even advanced from the initial *Alpha Centauri* screenshots, colored lighting, 3D acceleration, and lens flare play no part.

In the basic game (there will also be pre-made scenarios) you start with a single city formed from the command pod you landed in. Because of the near-war with the other factions, you all left the colony ship in a hurry and now lack most of the resources and all of the advanced technology databases. Depending on the settings you chose at the start of the game, you may or may not have even a basic map of the planet, and no matter what you certainly don't have a detailed topographical and resource scan. So, you get to setting up and expanding across the world the good old fashioned way—explore, discover, build, and conquer. In fact, these four approaches are not just fluffy concepts, they are woven into the game throughout: technologies are identified by which of the four categories they support, and you can even order a governor to operate a city under one of the four doctrines.

As you move out from your initial base you'll uncover resources that may be useful and pods from the mothership (these may contain units, resources, lost research databases, etc.). Eventually you'll start building new facilities, conduct research, bump into other factions, and encounter the alien ecology of your new home… and that's where *Alpha Centauri* grows beyond its *Civilization* origins.

A game all its own?

"*Alpha Centauri* provides a richer, deeper experience than any of our previous games," says Reynolds. One example he gives is the planet itself. "The world is very responsive to your presence," says Reynolds, "and reacts to your incursions in an increasingly organized manner. Players must choose how they will deal with this emerging sentient system." The life forms of the planet start responding to disruptions caused by your landing and, with the self-healing properties evinced by an ecological system, the vigor of the planet's response grows with time. All players suffer (or benefit?) from the actions of the ecology—because there is no alien intelligence, the planet forms no allies, although the successful player will either seek to redirect a planetary response into an enemy's camp or to, through research, adapt planetary life forms to his or her own purposes.

When you're not fighting the planet, chances are you'll be dealing with your fellow humans. "The whole diplomacy aspect is huge," says Briggs. "I guess we put more effort into that than anything else." There are a range of diplomatic options with hundreds of combinations of pacts, trade deals, and so on. There is also a Planetary Council where the leaders of the fac-

tions meet to decide whether they should attempt global-scale projects—like melting the polar ice-caps—that would be impossible for any one faction to accomplish. Another feature, much requested by *Civilization* fans, is factional borders—you can now see exactly where her land ends and yours begins. As you might expect, the rush to grab No Man's Land between factional areas—especially if there are resources located there—will result in many a border war.

While research seems, on the surface, much like that in *Civilization*, it's actually more involved and has broader implications. We're told the final research tree will be larger and more intertwined than the one in *Civilization* and that, while initially grounded in near-future technology and science, will expand into whole new areas (although both Briggs and Train assured us that it will always have a basis in reality).

One big addition for *Alpha Centauri* is the ability to design your own vehicles and units as you play. You can mix and match a variety of basic technological elements —chassises, armor, weapons, computers, etc.—to custom craft a vehicle for a specific need or, if you don't want to spend the time, merely tell the computer to build you a vehicle to best fit certain styles presets (best explorer, best Fast Assault unit, etc.). To keep players from instantly adapting to the best new technology, the team has implemented a prototype system. With it, the first time you build a new unit you're charged an additional prototyping cost. Prototypes can also become juicy targets—steal or capture an opponent's prototype and you can avoid paying the prototyping fees.

Civilization had tribes, *Alpha Centauri* has factions; at first they sound similar, but you soon realize that the factions of *Alpha Centauri* are much less homogenous than the tribes in *Civilization*. First off, they're split along philosophical instead of cultural lines—war, ecology, business, religion, etc. Each of the factions has specific strengths and weaknesses, so while the Spartans might be better fighters, the Gaians' ecological prowess may enable them to get a head start in taming the planet. What's more, players can conduct constant sociological tinkering through-out the game, tweaking any of a number of societal factors (Brigg's calls it, "Designing your own government") to get a people best suited to the task at hand. Again, if you don't wish to bother with the niggles you can just tell the computer to set your society on a course that would best suit one of the four paradigms and it will automatically choose the best mix of factors.

While *Populous* made you a god in order to give you the power to change the land itself, *Alpha Centauri* gives you 22nd Century terraforming technology (once you've researched it) to accomplish the job. The world in the game has a simple west-to-east weather pattern. Under such a system, the western slopes of mountains will tend to get more moisture while the eastern slopes and land in the mountains' rain shadow will get much less. You have a patch of land you'd like to see produce more crops? Use your terraforming units to build up a mountain range to the east. Want to starve off an enemy? Build that range to the west of his farm land and watch it turn to scrub. Build land bridges to give you easy access to new continents or to cut off an opponent's navy, or dig new seas to isolate your colony from an enemy with a strong land force. Of course, the opposing factions aren't likely to sit still, so expect terraforming to become a whole new form of warfare.

And for those with a militaristic bent, warfare too sees some changes from the *Civilization* model. The biggest change is the addition of psionic combat—you may have the unit with the biggest gun, but it will quickly crumble under the mental assault of a psionically-strong unit. The goal will be to develop units in both areas but that will be very expensive and extremely time consuming.

Crafting the finer points

A game like *Alpha Centauri* is understandably involved, enough so that it's become a concern of the team. When asked, independently, what the hardest part of the project has been, both Briggs and Train agreed it was accessibility, making sure that casual gamers can get into the game while not sacrificing the elements hardcore gamers love.

For Reynolds, the hardest part of the design-side of things "has actually been the fact that it's a science fiction game rather than a historical game." He points out that most people will be familiar with concepts used in a game like *Civilization*; "Everyone roughly understands the historical implications of mankind discovering 'Fire,' for instance. [However],

Technology develops from near-future levels people of today would recognize into far-future realms; nevertheless, it all has some grounding in reality

The lines on the map indicate factional borders, a feature long requested by fans of Civilization

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*Minus the faeries, spells, and other crap.

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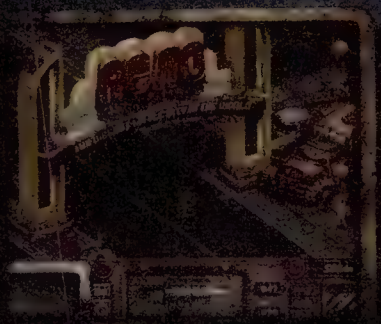

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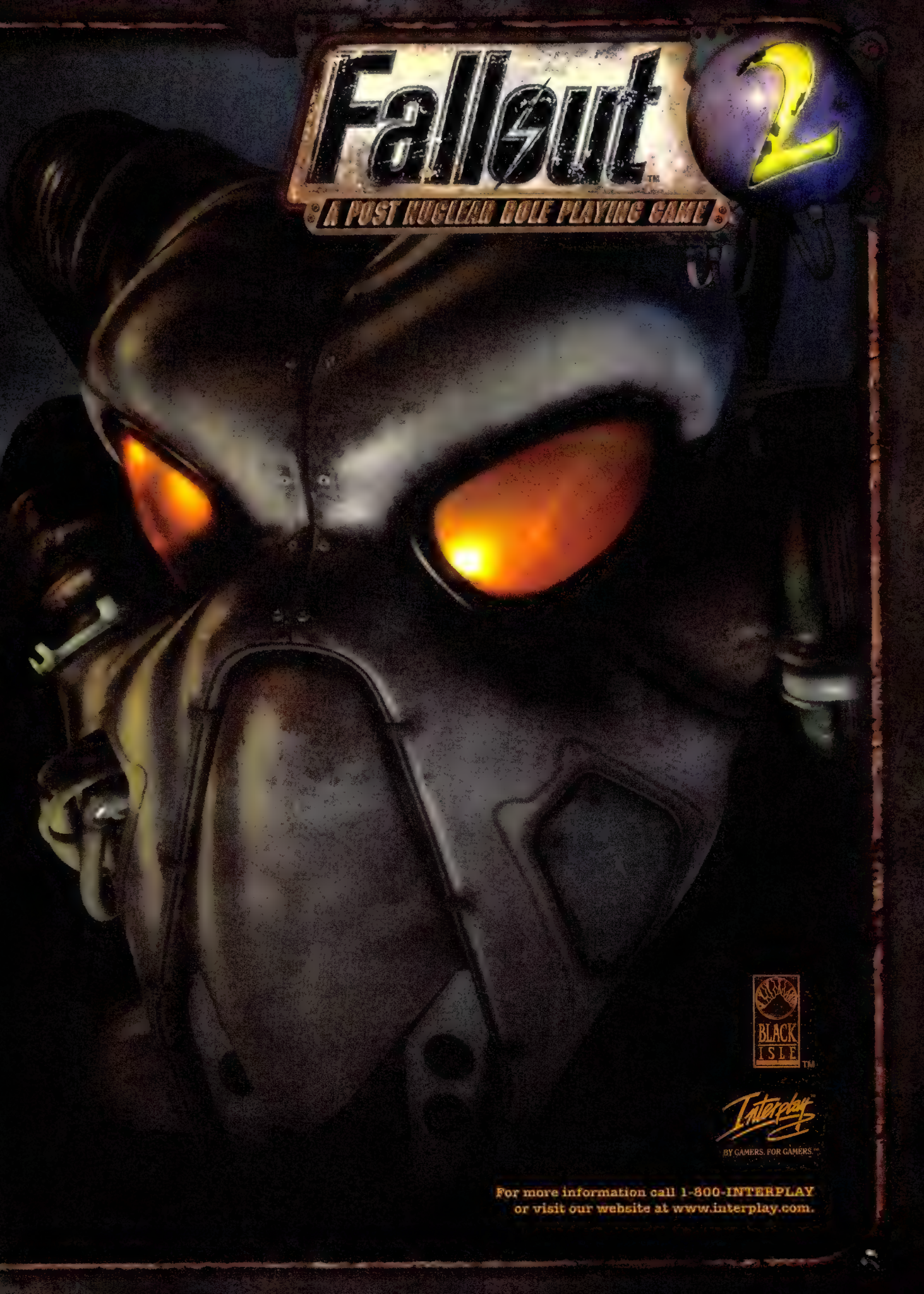
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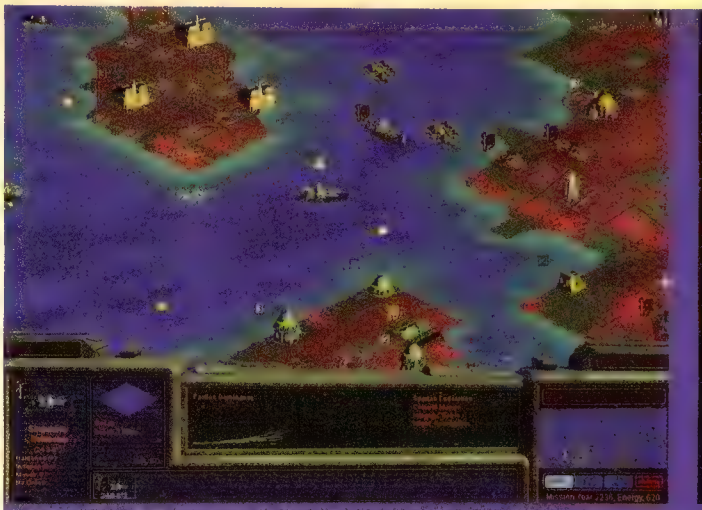

Alpha Centauri: Human vessels share the seas with Centauri life forms

Homeworld: Small craft aligned in a "Wall" of battle formation

when you put up a message saying 'Congratulations, you've discovered Polymorphic Software,' even smart people often tend to go 'duh?' So making an interesting and coherent science-fiction world and at the same time making it feel accessible and intuitive to the player has been kind of a, uh, witch."

Multiplayer madness

Aside from *Homeworld*'s single-player campaign (which can be played from the perspective of either race—the campaign won't change, just the types of ships involved), Garden tells us they plan a set of tutorial missions and a skirmish mode (against the computer or other players) as well as fixed multiplayer missions. Up to eight players can participate in mulit-player over LAN or Sierra's World Opponent Network (WON). Right now each player would in essence form his or her own fleet, but you will be able to form alliances, so theoretically players could coordinate actions: one could be in charge of building and commanding fighter-sized craft, another of mid-sized vessels, and so forth. Garden says they also plan to ship the game with a mission editor and that they'll be including their AI scripting language (called KAS).

...they plan a set of tutorial missions and a skirmish mode (against the computer or other players) as well as fixed multi-player missions.

Alpha Centauri will be multiplayer from the get-go; indeed, when we went down to see *Gettysburg* last year the team was already playing and early version of *Alpha Centauri* over the office LAN. This has come at some cost; according to Reynolds the multi-player module has been, from a programming perspective, the most difficult part of the game. "We've had to rethink the whole paradigm for game feedback," he says. Unlike the single player game, where turns are I-go/You-go, multiplayer turns are executed simultaneously, something done to help speed up gameplay. Additionally, research will be sped up and players may choose to operate under a time limit, giving multiplayer a "speed chess-like" feel. Train estimates that, depending on the options selected, gamers playing on a tiny-sized planet may be able to play an entire game in an hour and a half.

They say the devil's in the details, but *Alpha Centauri*'s details look to be more angelic than demonic. Like *Civilization*, *Alpha Centauri* will include a fixed map of the real-world, a map that Firaxis will craft with an eye to gameplay. There will be the random map generator and a number of fixed scenarios; they are even contemplating a scenario set in a post-Apocalyptic Earth, something by which they can explain what happened back home. Indeed, story telling is something else they can do in *Alpha Centauri* (in *Civilization*, of course, history told most of the tales). "The story of the Planet's interaction with humankind forms the backbone of a plot, where players fill in the details." Throughout the game you may get periodic "interludes," bits of text (and maybe voiceovers) that may contain some philosophy, a touch of history, or a bit of news. These snippets will be self contained, often triggered by events in the game instead of proceeding in a fixed, linear fashion.

The hard-core will remember that *Civilization II* was quite modifiable, but only by users willing to dig into text-based data files. For *Alpha Centauri* the team plans to continue this policy and even expand upon it. A number of editors are either planned or contemplated; possibilities include a map editor, a faction editor, a rules editor, and a diplomatic text editor. Even where a specific portion of the game doesn't get an editor, its data files will, where possible, be kept in formats that those with common tools can change.

Looking to the stars

Up until this year's Electronic Entertainment Expo, *Homeworld* was a stealth product that Sierra had said little about. After the show, however, anticipation has grown. Asked whether he anticipated the hype, Garden said he didn't know what to expect (although he is obviously pleased by the reception the game's been getting). Right now his goal is getting the game finished and having as much fun in the process as he can; if he and his team at Relic can do that then gamers can plan on joining the fun sometime between the end of the year and Spring.

Even though the game bears his name, *Sid Meier's Alpha Centauri* isn't specifically a Sid Meier design; nevertheless, his earlier games obviously served as an inspiration and set the stage for *Alpha Centauri* and Meier has, if not been the guiding hand for the project, certainly been on the crew. With the design of *Civilization II* to his credit, Brian Reynolds—aided by Meier, Briggs, Train, and the rest of Firaxis—is certainly more than qualified to carry on the legacy of *Civilization*. It's hard to imagine how, with all this behind it, *Alpha Centauri* will do anything less than succeed, but it will be up to the gaming community to decide. Is there still a market for "good ol' *Civilization*-fashioned" gaming? We'll all find out when *Alpha Centauri* launches late this year.

It's interesting to see two games sci-fi strategy games that are both highly anticipated yet completely different. Many in the industry have acted as if turn-based is dead, yet here comes Firaxis with a turn-based game. The *market* this year has pretty much turned up its nose at most real-time offerings (*StarCraft* a big exception), yet here comes Sierra with a game that adheres pretty closely with the RTS model of gameplay (although it certainly has a different visual look). You can bet the industry will be watching to see how both games are received, as this could affect the course of strategy gaming for some time to come, but even more importantly *gamers* will be keeping a close eye on both, and the industry will react to whatever the gamers embrace. ■

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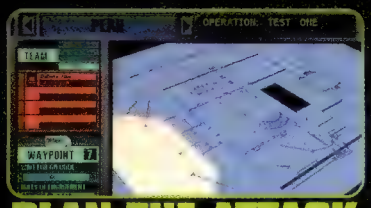

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Planescape Torment

Reincarnation and amnesia—together again

By Cindy Yans

Interplay · Windows 95

When Interplay invited us to drop by and see their yet-unannounced RPG set in TSR's *Planescape* universe, it was not particularly climactic. With the wave of *Baldur's Gate* hype, *Fallout 2* lurking solidly in the wings, and very little "wink-wink-nudge-nudge-wait-'til-you-see-what-*we*-have-up-our-sleeve" tantalizing going on, expectations were not very high. And that is what they were banking on. And that is why you could have knocked quite a few people over with a feather when Interplay's Black Isle Studios lifted the cover from their latest offering, *Planescape Torment*. Publicly announced shortly thereafter as their "Top Secret" title, *Torment* is very nearly indescribable, but we'll try.

"...And pretty maids all in a row"

The Black Isle team looked far from smug as they lined up in a single row against the wall of the conference room, looking for all the world as though they were about to burst into song. Or dance. Or worse–mime. They were dressed identically—black pants, black-and-white Black Isle tee-shirts, sheepish grins. This was to be a formal *Torment* presentation, and the prospect of formal presentation made the group exude a somewhat mixed comfort level.

Black Isle Division Director, Feargus Urquhart, polished and at ease, led off the presentation with "It all started with *Bard's Tale* more than a decade ago," and took us through a brief history of Interplay's role-playing titles (eliminating any mention of the execrable *Descent to Undermountain*). Urquhart then briefly introduced the key members of the team, each of whom graciously acknowledged the intro, and each of whom dutifully spoke, offering insights about the *Planescape* world and about their contribution to the game. The words "completely different" were tossed forth time and time again; and many of the ideas do ring unique. However, nothing prepared us for the video montage which depicted the *Planescape* multiverse as seen through the eyes of these designers and artists. A pounding sound-track punctuated with voices of requiem provided the backdrop for some very disturbing yet compelling images of multi-armed cubes, tortured beings, frightening monsters, bodies in conflagration—all very powerful images in a landscape of spires and skulls.

So, what is Planescape?

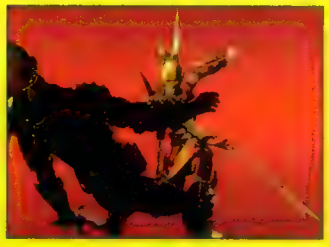
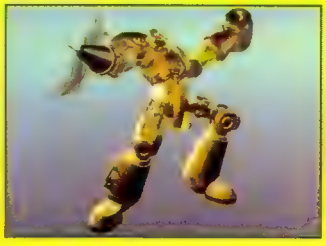
In 1993, TSR wanted to do a series of books about a place called The Outer Planes. Well, it seems that The Outer Planes was a catch-all place from which sprang and to which was cached all of the particularly strange things in TSR worlds that had no origin, niche or explanation. It was more or less a chaos zone. Zeb Cooke, creator of the *Planescape* universe, describes it this way: "So there was this huge collection of over ten years of stuff that was just kind of quietly ignored with no sense of logic to it, and we figured that 'Oh, we don't need to explain it—it's enough to say 'It came from The Outer Planes.' " So [one of the TSR designers] said, 'Let's do this series of books, one about each Plane,' which would have been about 10 million books, so TSR said, 'Well, that's a good idea, but 10 million books is not such a great idea. We'd rather create a campaign world that's set in the Outer Planes,' because they had figured out by that point that worlds sold. And so they came to me, the senior designer with a huge gaping hole in my schedule, and wanted me to take this idea and execute it. 'Make us a campaign world that's completely different from all of the ones we have....'"

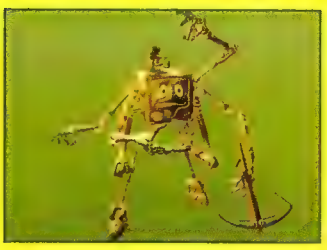
Well TSR had a good many worlds by this time, and, after all, "new" is very hard to come by. But Cooke managed to create with the *Planescape* multiverse something that *is* very different than anything else out there. *Planescape* is a more adult, hardcore (if you will) fantasy setting where the architecture, the people, the creatures, everything has a roughness, a ferocity about it that creates a feeling that is almost harsh. "A crazy, spiky world," says Urquhart. It's a world where knowledge and thoughts wield more power than the sword. Belief has the ability to reshape worlds, kill and resurrect powers and change the laws of physics.

The world is so vast that a computer game based upon it would have to pick and choose just what aspects of the multiverse to deal with. The team chose to place the game around a central fixture of *Planescape*, the city of Sigil, which is located at the top of an infinitely tall spire—no matter that an infinitely tall spire would not *have* a top.... Sigil is also known as "The Cage," or "The City of Doors," the streets of which contain portals (some hidden, some obvious) that lead to anywhere in existence, provided you have the proper key.

From campaign world to computer game

Torment is a violent but beautiful, character-driven isometric RPG that uses the Bioware Infinity



Engine also used for *Baldur's Gate*. Not having to worry about the engine (much) leaves the team plenty of energy to devote to coming up with buckets of artwork and bizarre ideas for character enhancement, gameplay, and spell effects. Designer Colin McComb, who took over the *Planescape* designer role at TSR after Cooke left, says that he has had some of his best ideas while contemplating action figures that he and his colleagues carefully diorama-tized daily—most notably 10 or so Spiderman dolls posed in an arrangement he calls "The Spiderman Snuff and Sodomy Club." Although he arrived at Interplay just in time to not land the lead design job, McComb acknowledges that lead designer Chris Avellone "also has the kind of twisted sensibility we're really looking for in bringing *Planescape* to life." Although with *Torment*, you might have to say that they're bringing the world to death.

The game begins with the character waking up on a cold stone slab in the Mortuary of Sigil, with no idea of who he is, what he is doing there or how he died—and having mentioned how "new" is hard to come by, suffice it to say that the team was a little more than grumpy at the release of ASC Games' *Sanitarium*, which opens with the same type of amnesiac moment. The basic object of the game is to escape and explore the world outside the Mortuary to uncover the secret of the character's death and rebirth. Says senior producer Guido Henkel (a 15 year veteran of the industry, and last seen working with Sirtech on the *Realms of Arkania* games), "One of the main aspects of *Torment* is the internal development of the character, rather than just going about gathering experience, gathering gold pieces, getting more weapons, getting better weapons—it's all nice, but it's been done. We wanted to focus on the internal development of the character—to make him grow, and gain memories, additional knowledge, and at the same time have the player grow with the character." This high concept has the player defining himself though his actions, rather than through a myriad of statistics.

Better off dead

Torment is a mystery of identity, and memory gathering. You begin the game already dead—immortal, in fact—but having lived a great many more than one lifetimes. You've lived a few thousand years, and died time and time again. During each lifetime, you've had different jobs, made a lot of friends, but also many enemies. In your previous lives, each time you took enough damage that would kill a normal human being, you "died" by losing all memories of past events. So through the years you've led a stuttering existence, starting anew each time with a completely lost history. Throughout your many incarnations, however, you have been a 25th level character in all possible *AD&D* character classes (mage, thief, master swordsman, etc.), and will remember abilities that pertain to all of these during the course of the story.

At the beginning of the game, you are a blank slate (equivalent to a third level *AD&D* character), with a lot of hit points. As the story progresses, you will have the ability to cast spells beyond your current level, use very high-level warrior skills and get various priest and thief benefits much earlier than normally allowed. The *Planescape* ruleset is a modified *AD&D*-style one, allowing NPC allies that would not normally be seen in a *Forgotten Realms* world. You will be able to have a maximum of five characters in your party. The keys to your identity, actual and emotional, are found as memories are gathered and emotions explored—curiosity, greed, fear, a need to escape, survival, self-defense and revenge are all present in this game, all pointing the character toward self-actualization.

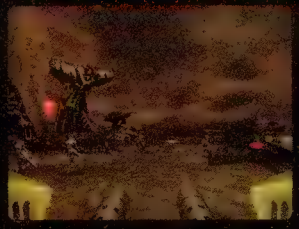
"We wanted a game where it is just as important to gather memories as experience," says Avallone. "A game where every time you see the death screen it actually advances the plot rather than gives you a reason to reload… A lot of these memories create a lot of conflict and occasionally can help you out. The baggage starts catching up with you. And some of it's good, and some of it's bad. It's kind of like a karmic avalanche that starts hitting you as the game progresses."

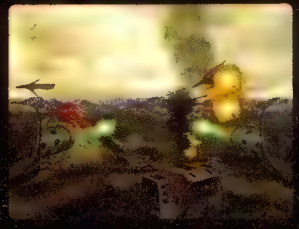
Your character, the Hero, is an immortal who has had many names, among them "The Nameless One," "The Restless One," "The Deathless One," "The Lost One," and "The Walking Scab." The designers wanted to make it evident that he is a dead, somewhat tortured creature, and his most recent portrait brings to mind a walnut from the Caribbean. He has walnut-colored, walnut-textured skin, and beaded dreadlocks—almost comical at a glance; in his eyes, however, you can see the pain and confusion of today, and the ancient weariness of yesterday.

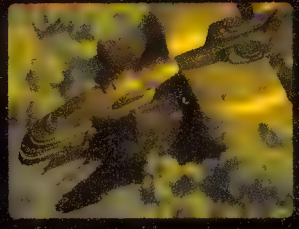
Violence and Rictus

Some of the earliest ideas for *Planescape*'s action elements were so overtly violent that Henkel says they had to reign them in quite a bit. "Initially, the design was very strong, very graphic and very, very violent, and I read over it, and it didn't appeal to me that much. It seemed gratuitous. Do we really need that? It doesn't help the game. It's just there for the sake of the violence. It came to the point that the main character could chop off his own leg and use it as a weapon, or poke out his own eyes and throw them at people and all totally wacky stuff…[sounds cool to us], and I thought, well, we don't really need that, so we toned it down a little."

Although the Walking Scab's ability to club opponents with his left leg may have been eliminated, they have not completely abandoned the macabre. We have been promised that we'll be able to plunge scalpels into foes' eyes, lace their food with poisonous embalming fluid, push them into man-eating pockets of ooze, hurl them into razor-vines, conjure burrowing rot-grubs within a victim's brain, cast spells that







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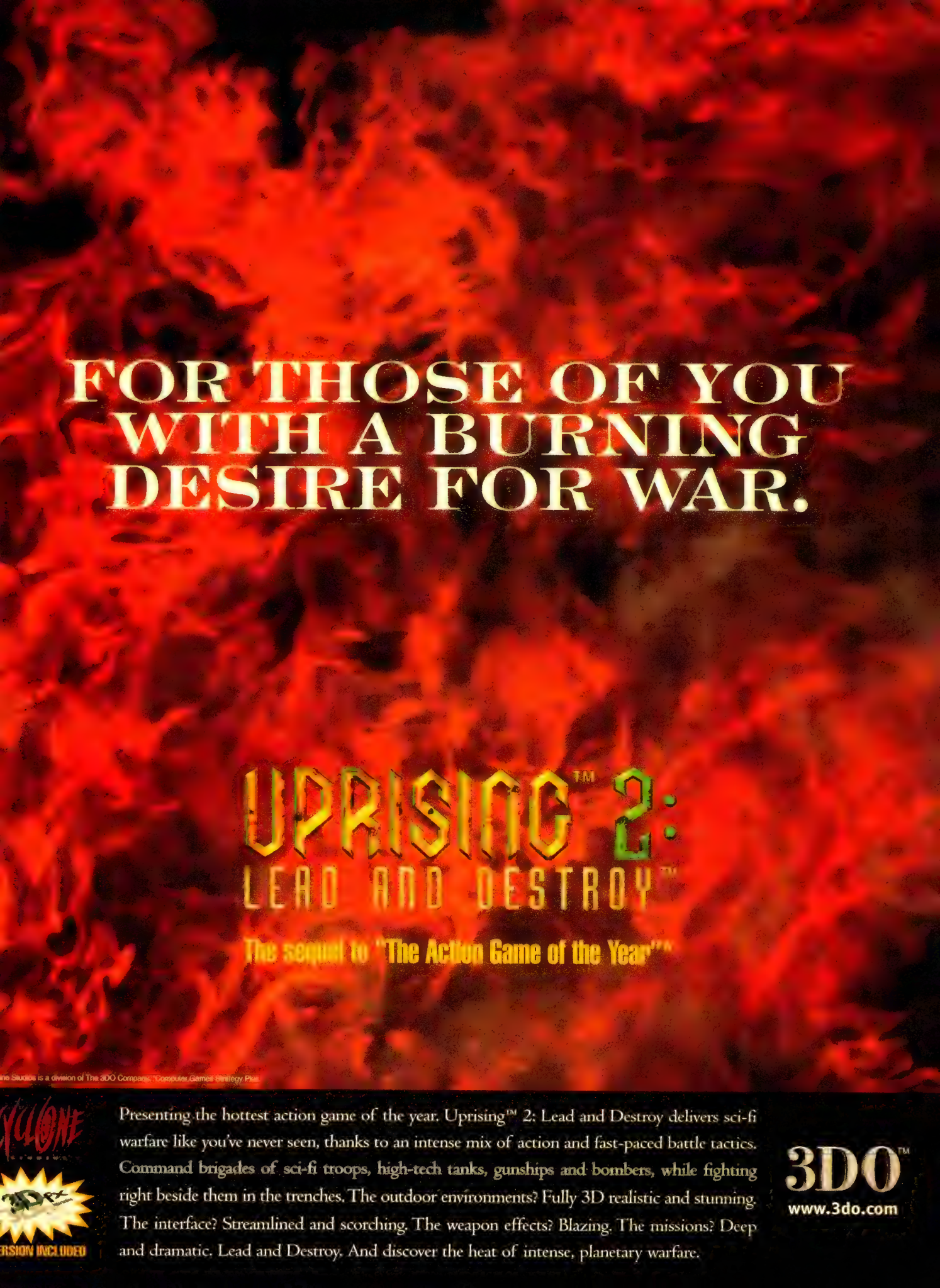
"The game looks beautiful. The 3Dfx graphics that I saw were flat out amazing." - Game Pen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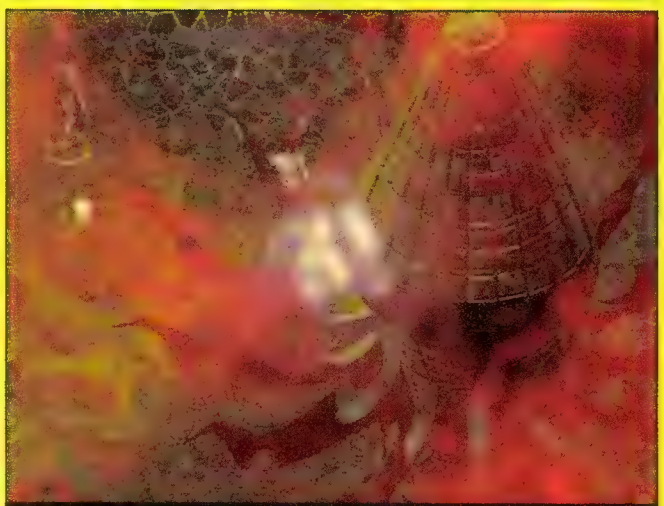
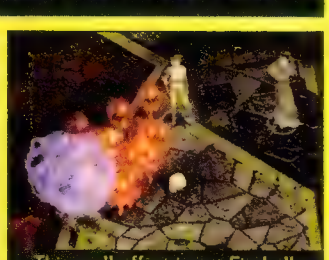


Organic texturing brings a blood-like quality to the environment

Character appearance changes significantly depending upon armor and weapon choices

Go into the light, Carol Ann



This spell effect is not Fireball

make them bleed from every orifice or change a person's scent so they attract packs of hungry rats—just for laughs, of course. Jam your hand into your opponent's body, rip out his soul and tell it to kill its owner, skin a beast you've slain and wear it as armor. Take the molted skin of a giant reptile and stitch it into a shield or skin a Quill and wear its spiny fur like a cloak.

Comic relief does exist, though, often in the form of one Mortimer "Morte" Rictusgrin, a sarcastic floating skull who is the Hero's first companion (another wave of dismay washed over the design team when *Curse of Monkey Island*'s floating skull, Murray, appeared last year—no matter, Morte will hold his own).

Beyond the hard-core

There will be plenty to engage the TSR aficionado, but the designers are dedicated to making this game accessible to even the new or casual role-player. "Usually when you have hard-core role-playing games, they are very hard to get into," says Henkel. "And that is one of the main problems role-playing games have in this market, why they are sitting here in this … niche, is that they are so inaccessible. So we tried to break that nut by saying, 'Let's just put in the most basic skills and attributes we need'—but we created a learning curve. As the game asks for more detail, we put it in, and explain it to the player, so that all of a sudden the player *knows* what 'dexterity' is and what good it does, and what bad, for that matter. If, for example, there are new spells, we introduce them one at a time, to make sure that the player learns and understands what he's doing."

It appears as though you'll be half disturbed and half amused by this unexpected splash from Black Isle. Keep an eye out for this farrago of mayhem in Spring 1999—it'll leave the lights on for you. ■

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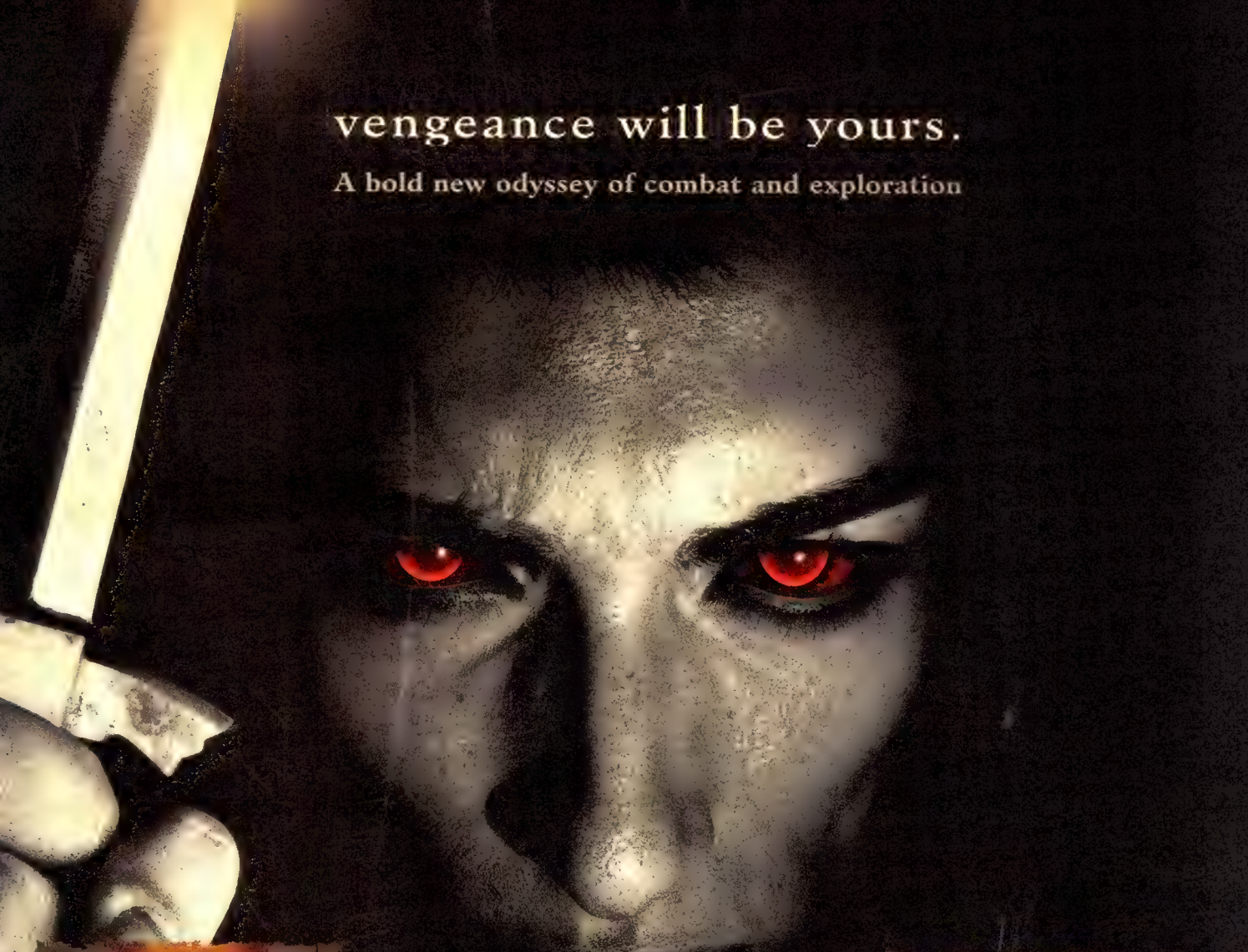

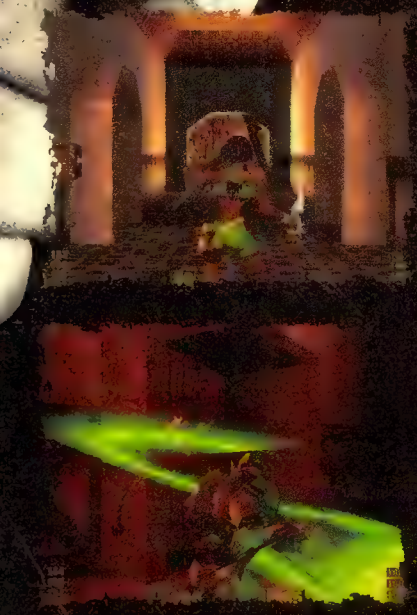

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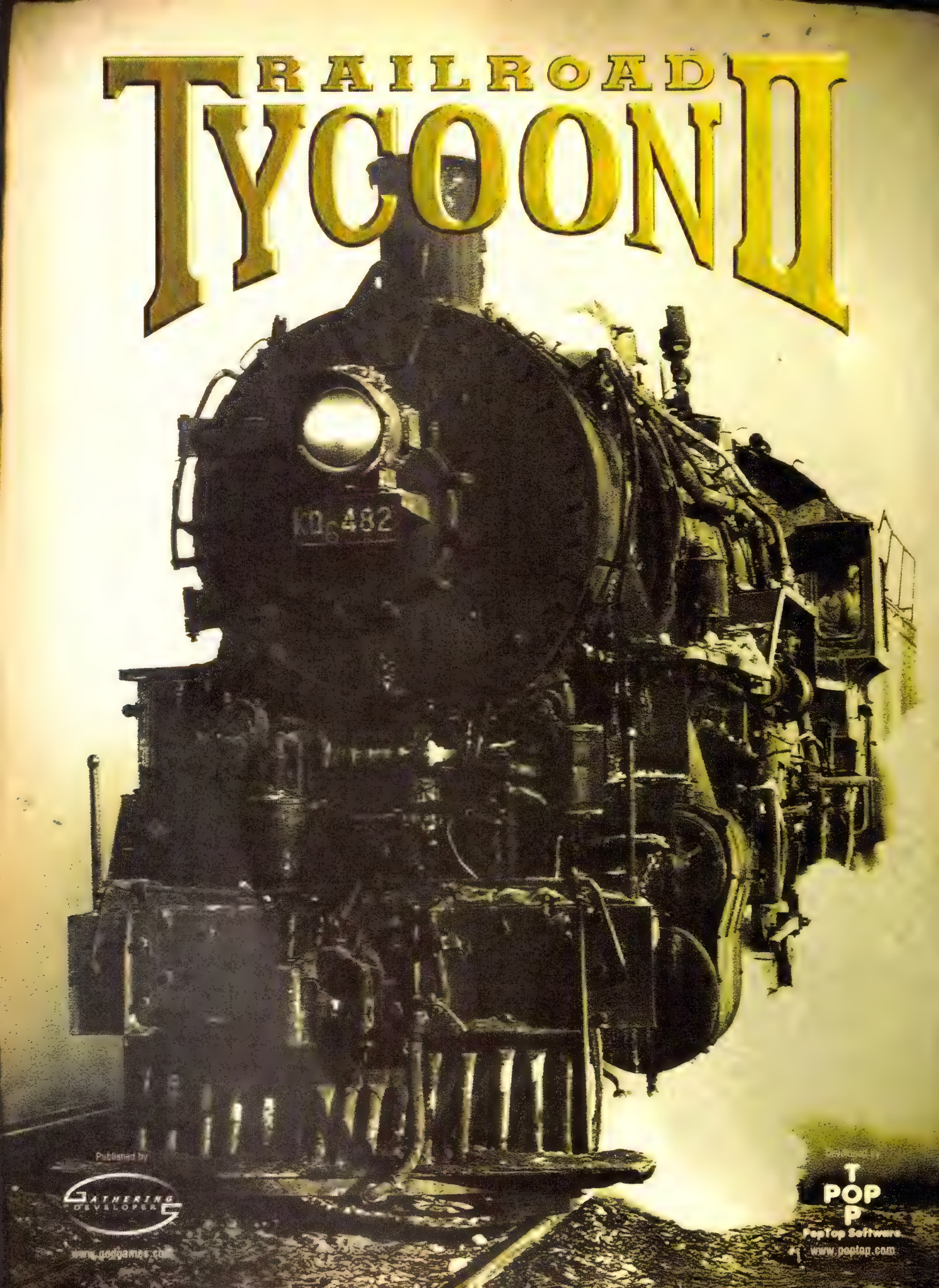
RAILROAD TYCOON II



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Don't get left at the station.

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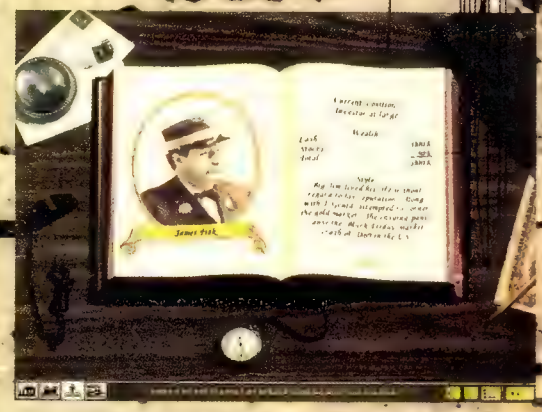

40 different tycoons all share one goal: bankrupting you.

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UNIFIED GAMERS ONLINE E3 1998 BEST OF SHOW WWW.UGO.NET

A STRATEGY GAME THAT RUNS ON A TOTALLY DIFFERENT KIND OF ENGINE.

Eidos Interactive • Windows 95 **by Cindy Vanous**

Scrolls and tomes will reveal helpful hints and a fascinating backstory

Revenant

Dead Man Questing

Two years ago, the computer role-playing game (RPG) was a vanishing breed. Each new sighting was a rare and wonderful moment (with a bare few exceptions, which will remain gracefully nameless), treasured all the more because players never knew when another one might come along. Now, through some glorious quirk of cyclical market taste, the thundering herds of RPGs are slowly returning...and the folks at Eidos Interactive seem determined to strengthen the breed through cross-pollination. From Squaresoft's *Final Fantasy VII*, a console port, to Ion Storm's *Daikatana*, a shooter with RPG elements, Eidos' publishing choices reflect an interesting and fun variety of hybrids. Next up? *Revenant*, an action-RPG from Arizona-based developer, Cinematix.

"It's the story, of a kidnapped lady..."

On the surface, *Revenant*'s plot seems to follow the traditional RPG standard: "A hero is sent by a powerful man to rescue a captured princess." The main character quests across the land, battles through an enemy-infested underworld, evades deadly traps and moves ever closer to a final, desperate confrontation. Over the course of the game, he evolves, becoming more powerful as his skills increase.

Sound familiar? Well, if you've ever read a fantasy novel or fired up that VHS copy of *Star Wars*, it should. Fortunately, the folks at Cinematix have given their story an intriguing and dark sort of spin which makes *Revenant* unique.

Picture the island of Ahkuilon---a broken land, seething with volcanic fissures and teeming with monsters. Ruins are more common than rats (normal rats, anyway), and unpredictable elemental forces help to ensure a limitless supply of future architectural debris. Humanity huddles together for survival behind well-defended walls while their leaders and protectors, the three Warlords, vie for power amongst themselves.

Long ago, Ahkuilon was a nice place, complete with a flourishing, advanced civilization. Somehow, though, these allegedly advanced boneheads bowled a gutter ball in the alley of rational thought. They messed with primal powers they couldn't control, and the whole world suffered the consequences. Centuries later, their culture is all but forgotten, lost in mankind's return to barbarism.

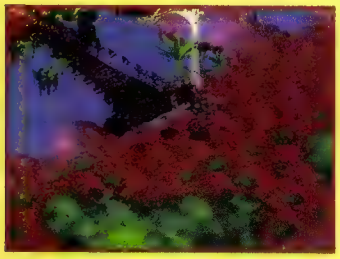
Now one of their champions, a man called Locke, is about to live again. The daughter of one of Ahkuilon's Warlords has been kidnapped by a rival, and Locke is summoned as a revenant, or undead warrior, to find the girl and wreak vengeance on her captors. His mind begins as a blank slate, but the longer he remains in the land of the living, the more of his past, and his formidable fighting skills, will be remembered. In the end, perhaps it will be no coincidence that he was the one chosen to return.

"16 bits on a dead man's palette"

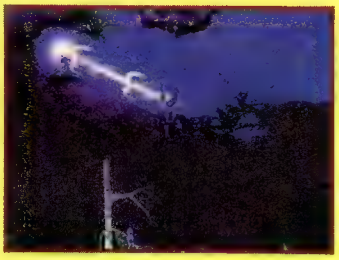
The *Revenant* graphics setup is intriguing, not to mention gorgeous. Where many of the new RPG developers have adopted 3D engines reminiscent of *Quake* or *Tomb Raider*, Cinematix decided to take the traditional *Ultima* or *Diablo*-style isometric engine to a new level. Unwilling to part with either the level of detail available to 2D tile-based games or the range of motion available to 3D character models, they simply fused the two concepts together.

The result is a surreal, hand-painted landscape with structures made of detailed 3D tiles, populated by 3D models. Add motion-captured, natural animation for the characters and monsters and the world begins to seem alive. When Locke walks into a tavern, for instance, any characters in the vicinity will be engaged in very ordinary business, playing darts or drinking ale. When he talks to someone, they might turn to face him. If they refuse to help him or act superior, he may just shake them around. (Well, he's dead and having a really bad day. Cut him some slack!) The detail of the char-

NPCs can help you in your quest. At least, they'd better...



Fight like you mean it, or you might end up flying Air Ugly



This is either a lightning spell or Locke has a thing for walking over carpets in wool socks

acter models is another nifty feature. If Locke finds a new pair of armored boots and tries them on for size, you'll see that exact pair appear on his feet. Every little graphical touch adds to the immersive feeling of this game.

Of course, immersiveness has its price... this might be a nice world to visit, but you would *not* want to live here!

"If I had a war-hammer"

Mmmmmmm... combat. The stuff that action-RPGs are made of. The developers put a lot of emphasis on *Revenant*'s fighting engine, and this thought and effort show through in the pre-release version of the game. All combat takes place in real-time, in the actual game landscape. Even this early in development, the enemy AI is realistic and often subtle (for example, a monster's built-in dislike of certain other species can lead to mayhem if you lure one into the other's territory). The fighting animations show the smoothness of motion capture, and the physics of battle are carefully calculated (you wouldn't want that severed head to fly the wrong way, now would you?).

When Locke encounters a monster, or vice versa (some critters will hide until their prey—that's you—is close enough to attack), you can switch from his standard walking or running mode to a combat mode. While this is active, he'll draw his weapon and turn to face the closest enemy, or whichever creature you specifically move him towards. You can pre-select the type of attack you like to use, from a wild overhand swing (which does major damage but often misses) to a horizontal slash (which has a chance of slicing open multiple opponents, if they're really short and clustered together). As Locke slowly regains the memory of his fighting skills, he'll also acquire combination moves which do extra damage.

Of course, monsters have special attacks as well, as you may discover when a lucky lurker picks you up by the head.... Some creatures prefer to attack singly, some will gang up on you. If Locke is fortunate enough to spot one before it sees him, you can try sneaking him past it in stealth mode. In most cases it's a good idea to remove jingly armor and douse any light sources before you try this—the monsters may be ugly, but they're far from stupid. In the catacombs and dungeons, though, torches can work to your advantage. Some subterranean beasts see better in the dark, and will have a difficult time locating Locke in a lighted area.

"Hey Mister Talisman, tally me some mana"

The magic system is equally straightforward. As Locke explores the world (and rifles the personal belongings of townsfolk), he acquires a wide selection of talismans. Each of these arcane stones embodies a type of magic—ice, life, motion, and so on. Strung together in certain combinations, the talismans allow Locke to cast various spells. For example, a Fire talisman on its own might allow him to scorch an enemy standing nearby, but Fire in combination with Motion will give him a long-range incendiary. As Locke becomes more experienced, his spells will become more powerful.

Collect these talismans to win a valuable prize—powerful magic spells!

In a welcome attempt to help spellcasters survive a real-time combat encounter, *Revenant* also provides a magic pre-set option. You can store the talisman combinations for up to four of your most commonly used spells, then access them at any time with a single click. This is mighty handy when you've got two lurkers and a stone giant on your tail and you don't have time to sort through your stuff.

"Four's Company"

Revenant offers several forms of multi-player support, some cooperative, others decidedly anarchic. For those who like adventuring with friends, a party of up to four characters can explore individual regions together, or actually play through the entire game. Even if you're part way through the single-player version when a friend decides to help out, you won't have to restart. Multi-player characters can join and leave the story at will, inventory items are automatically re-allocated to suit, and the NPCs will adjust their dialogue accordingly.

For those who prefer a sort of "ongoing domestic dispute" variety of friendship, support will also be provided for deathmatch play. In this mode, each character will be spawned in a different part of the dungeon, and you will be free to hack (or help) other players as you see fit. You can either choose to generate a new character for battling your buddies, or use a pre-existing saved character.

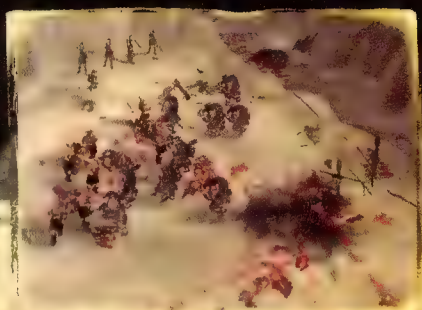
The multi-player modes will also offer three new adventurers for your questing pleasure. Bayne is the proverbial tank, an ex-soldier with high strength and lots of combat experience. Navarro, a defrocked shaman-wizard, has exceptional intelligence and a penchant for casting spells (which don't always work out quite the way he'd planned). And Morganna, the only female adventurer, is a dexterous and stealthy assassin who does extra damage when attacking a foe from behind. All of these characters have distinct personalities, and NPCs will react differently to each one.

Cinematix' Ben Cooley hinted at future multi-player expansion—he says they may provide additional multi-player characters after *Revenant*'s release, whether through add-on modules or a download section on the Eidos website. Another possibility is a downloadable archive of new monsters and items for the multi-player version, plus a library of gamer-created goodies. (An editor is scheduled to ship on the game CD, and talented users with *3D Studio Max* should even be able to produce their own animations.)

At this time, however, *Revenant*'s multi-player modes are still unimplemented, as are many of the conversations, spells, sounds, and character animations. It remains to be seen how these unseen features will actually work and look when this title is released early next year. But the development team is excited and enthusiastic about their project, and if the alpha version is any indication of the final game's quality, *Revenant* may be one of the games that helps resurrect the RPG genre. ■

myth II
SOULBLIGHTER

It's just you and your men. They follow you into battle. And follow your orders. Whether you lead them to victory or to their deaths depends solely on your decisions. Such are the perils of war in Myth II: Soulblighter. The strategy game that puts the strategy where it counts. On the battlefield. With its real world, 3D environment, ground positions become critical. Archers shoot farther from hills and bluffs. Dwarven grenades roll down hill. Trees block arrows. You either use the terrain to your advantage or suffer the consequences. And with Myth II: Soulblighter's rotating battlefield camera, you can watch all the combat unfold from every angle. Everything that made Myth: The Fallen Lords 1997's Game of the Year is here. With better game play, graphics and a whole new storyline with new units and new levels. Plus an editor that lets you make your own maps, modify units and even change the force of gravity. And of course there's bungie.net, the world's best free* site for multi-player gaming. Fully redesigned and ready to host worldwide carnage. The question is are you ready for Myth II: Soulblighter?



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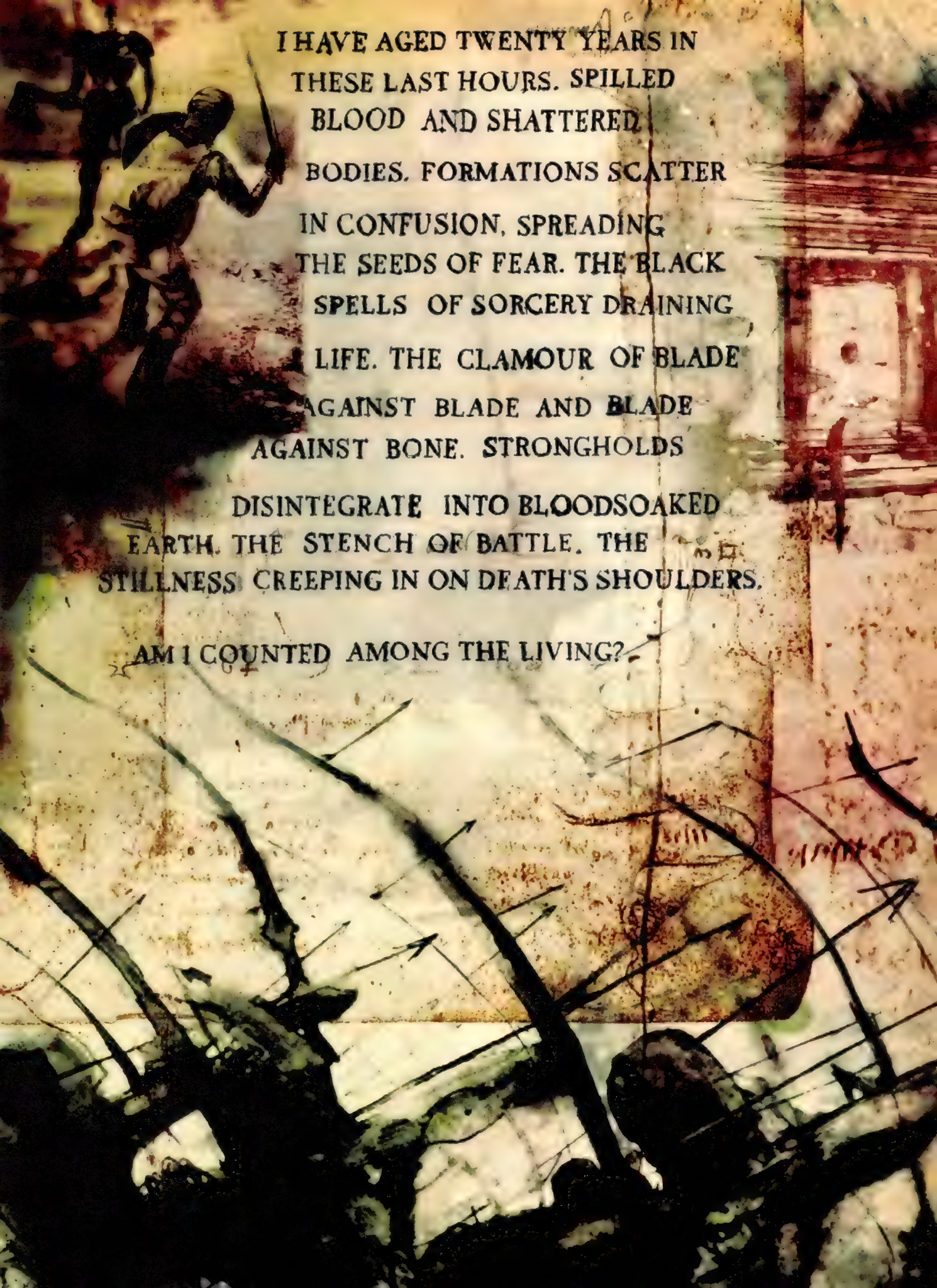

I HAVE AGED TWENTY YEARS IN
THESE LAST HOURS. SPILLED
BLOOD AND SHATTERED
BODIES. FORMATIONS SCATTER
IN CONFUSION, SPREADING
THE SEEDS OF FEAR. THE BLACK
SPELLS OF SORCERY DRAINING
LIFE. THE CLAMOUR OF BLADE
AGAINST BLADE AND BLADE
AGAINST BONE. STRONGHOLDS
DISINTEGRATE INTO BLOODSOAKED
EARTH. THE STENCH OF BATTLE. THE
STILLNESS CREEPING IN ON DEATH'S SHOULDERS.
AM I COUNTED AMONG THE LIVING?

Wizardry VIII

Something old, something borrowed, something new

Magic Missile is one of the spells in your repertoire.

By Andy Backer **Sirtech • Windows 95**

Beginning with *Wizardry: Proving Grounds of the Mad Overlord* released in 1981 and ending with *Wizardry VII: Crusaders of the Dark Savant*, released in 1992, a *Wizardry* was usually the best role-playing game of the year. Sirtech will soon release *Wizardry VIII*. Will it follow tradition and be another winner?

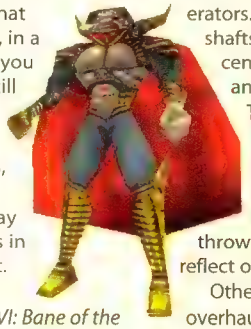
The designers

Three precocious designers have replaced D. W. Bradley, the designer of the last three *Wizardry* games. The team includes Linda Currie, Designer, Producer and Director; Alex Meduna, Designer, Lead Game Programmer; and Brenda Garneau, Designer, Story and Writing. Currie designed both *Jagged Alliance I* and *II*, *Deadly Games* and *Nemesis: A Wizardry Adventure*, while Meduna was the brain behind the award-winning AI in *Jagged Alliance I* and *II* as well as *Deadly Games*.

Garneau has been with Sirtech for 16 years now. The company first hired her to play *Wizardry* and answer people's questions about the game. "Through the years," she adds, "I worked on all the games in whatever way I could, apprenticing, you might say, and I've been fortunate enough to work with and learn the trade from a lot of good designers. I love *Wizardry*. It was my first computer game, and it honestly was love at first sight. I know this series inside and out, and have spent over half my life (literally) learning everything about it."

Something old

Older *Wizardry* fans will be happy to know that while Sirtech has considerably changed the system as used in *Crusaders of the Dark Savant*, it hasn't changed the things that made it this magazine's "Game of the Year" for 1992. It still has the old races and professions, and you can still import your party from the previous *Wizardry*. Moreover, just as in *Crusaders*, the game has multiple beginnings that determine where you start, what you start with, and, in a nutshell, who calls you "friend." You can still create your own detailed, customized characters, lead a party of six adventurers and slay hordes of creatures in turn-based combat.



The story that began in *Wizardry VI: Bane of the Cosmic Forge* and which continued in *Crusaders of the Dark Savant* now ends in *VIII*. Many of the characters from *Crusaders* have now come to the world of Dominus, including the Dark Savant, the militant Umpani, the devious T'Rang, the inscrutable Mooks and a certain party of star-crossed adventurers (your group). They've all come to earn the right to enter the elusive and mysterious Cosmic Circle.

Something borrowed

Ever since the release of *Jagged Alliance*, many players have longed for a role-playing game where each combat squad member wasn't merely a talking head but featured a distinct personality. *Wizardry VIII* aims to be that game. For the first time in a role-playing game, each and every character has a unique, customizable, and responsive personality. Maybe you'll choose the "Eccentric" type for your mage, or "Thrill-seeker" for your rogue. Each character comments on its environment, talks to fellow characters, and asks questions based on the personality you've chosen for them.

Meduna borrowed the artificial intelligence (AI) he created for *Jagged Alliance* and improved on it for the new *Wizardry*. He's also improved the AI for the game's non-player characters (NPCs). They not only learn and have evolving agendas but also, depending on their personality, form their own goals.

Something new

Every feature in the game has been completely renovated from the ground up, beginning with the smooth scrolling, high-color 3D graphics engine. You can look at anything you like, be it at eye level, above or below you. It's a fully interactive world—for example, in one area of the game you must knock over a wall support, causing a cave-in that opens up a passageway.

Wizardry VIII is being designed specifically for 3D graphics accelerators. You'll see shimmering shafts of light, intricate translucent windows of etched glass and spectacular spell effects. The monsters and characters you'll meet are polygons, not bitmaps. You'll see their bodies in three-dimensions. When you throw a fireball, you'll see it reflect off a creature's scaly hide.

Other renovations include an overhaul of the character creation system. You no longer have to sit for hours rolling and re-rolling to get a character you want. The system now allows you to pick whatever character you want without

[left] The Trang also return...

...as do the Umpani [bottom previous page].

Moreover, the beloved Rattkins are back, too! [right]

rolling for it. You can simply choose to create a Faerie Ninja rather then spend four hours rolling for one. However, the Faerie will only be an "apprentice" Ninja at first.

There are still the same eleven fantasy races to choose from, races like the Elves, Dwarves, the feline Felpur, or the acid-breathing Dracon. However, there is a brand new *profession*: the Gadgeteer, the only profession that can use all of the game's complex mechanical devices called "gadgets." These gadgets can be used to achieve spell-like effects during combat and while adventuring (oil slicks, fireworks, and stupor-glue are examples). A new skill called Engineering allows for the creation of even more powerful gadgets. The profession was conceived as being useful, but one that would add a humorous, slapstick element to the game.

Of the fourteen professions in *Crusaders of the Dark Savant*, the Bishop, Fighter and Rogue (formerly known as "Thief") were perceived as being so weak that they were rarely used. In the new game, Bishops now have access to spells in all four spellbooks: Alchemist, Psionic, Mage and Priest. They get a bonus to their Artifact skill so they can best identify and use magic items and they can remove cursed items without having to use a spell.

Fighters now have more hit points, Stamina Regeneration and Close Combat skill which gives them a significant leg up over the part-time warrior classes like Lord or Ninja. The Rogue is now a better fighter, has more hit points, better weapon and armor selection, a powerful backstab ability that does not require hiding first, and a bonus in ability to deal with locks and traps. [See chart, "Skilled Labor"]

Complications

Many players love the *idea* of fantasy role-playing but are turned off by the genre's complicated rules and constant random combats. *Wizardry VIII* is attempting to address those issues without dumbing down the game.

There's an adjustable difficulty level, of course, but that's just the start. Combat is being balanced to make it easier to get into the game when you begin (no more getting killed in the first two minutes of the adventure). In addition, the game will get more difficult towards the end, so there'll be no more cruising through the final battles on autopilot.

NEW SKILLS AND SPECIAL ABILITIES FOR EACH PROFESSION

PROFESSION	SKILL BONUS	SPECIAL ABILITY
Fighter	Close Combat	Stamina Regeneration
Lord	Duel Weapons	Health Regeneration
Valkyrie	Polearms	Cheat Death
Ranger	Ranged Combat	Ranged Critical Hit
Samurai	Swords	Fearless
Ninja	Critical Strike	Chameleon Powers
Monk	Martial Arts	Damage Resistance, even while Blind
Rogue	Locks and Traps	Free Backstabbing
Gadgeteer	Modern Weapons	Engineering
Bard	Communication	Charm NPCs
Priest	Theology	Pray for Miracle
Alchemist	Alchemist	Transmute Metal to Gold
Psionic	Theosophy	Mental Condition Immunity
Bishop	Artifacts	Remove Cursed Items
Mage	Thamaturgy	Bonus to Resist Everything

The Fireball is only one of the many spells you may choose to cast

The game features a smooth scrolling, high-color and true 3D graphics engine

You can customize the view. Control freaks can use a traditional *Crusaders*-style view that displays all sorts of useful information, while those who want to bask in the game's 3D graphics can use full-screen mode. You can customize conversations by creating your own keyword lists, or customize combat by selecting "continuous combat" and different fighting styles during melees.

When asked which feature she was most proud of, Garneau immediately mentioned the combat system. "This is the first time an accurate, phased-time combat system has ever been designed and implemented in a 3D world where monsters can attack you from all sides at different times and at different distances," she says. "Most importantly, phased-time combat is accurate. It's not a mouse-thwapping exercise like real-time. It's not turn-based, which is interesting, but not mathematically accurate. The player will just think it's fun and logical, but to an RPG player like me, it's an accurately modeled dream system that only a computer could handle. Either that, or Albert Einstein."

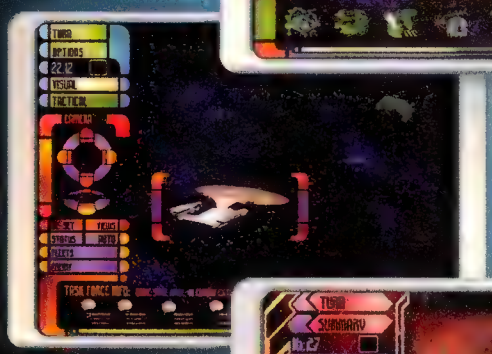
Good news

In addition to the above, the game sports many new monsters, and a new magic system and spells. There will be a much more logical and less confusing method of disarming traps while opening treasure chests, and you can now hack or blast doors open instead of just forcing them. There are also new ways of automatically sorting items in your inventory and a better, full-time automap.

Since the game isn't scheduled for release until March of 1999, there may be more features planned that Sirtech isn't unveiling yet. There is one other thing of which we *are* very much aware, however: The Dark Savant is back in town, and that alone is good news for *Wizardry* fans. ■

Control covert operations

Allocate technology resources



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Elevation: 1
J. Ricketts
I: 5 Com: 0/5
active. G. McClellan is dispatching orders to J. Ricketts Christian (MI) takes 1 cohesion hit for moving down 1 level. Ripley (MI) fires rifle-muskets at Hartsuff (MI) for 0 cohesion hits

◀ A clash of arms

North vs. South

The Great Battles of Lee & Grant

The American Civil War is a popular venue for board and computer wargamers alike. Hence it was no surprise that Interactive Magic decided to mate what is perhaps their most successful wargame system—the engine from *The Great Battles* series—with the era. Not surprisingly, the result is a turn-based Civil War game with a decided *Great Battles* feel.

"We felt that the *Great Battles* engine is not a bad starting point for any turn-based game using a hexagonal grid with massed bodies of troops and parts of this proven engine are *definitely* still in use," said Craig Taylor, the producer of *North vs. South*. However, it's not a perfect match. "We do miss the dead elephants floating down the river. But show me a Civil War battle with pachyderms."

Taylor is a veteran of many game design battles himself. His first design—*Wooden Ships and Iron Men* (1974)—is perhaps *the* board wargame simulation of age of sail sea battles. Since that time, he has designed games or modules for Battleline, Game Time Games, Yaquinto, and Avalon Hill. Suffice it to say he is no "suit" with fifteen minutes of *Tetris* on his game-playing resume.

There will be ten battles on the shiny side of the ROM. These include most of the Civil War's greatest hits: Gettysburg, Antietam, the Bull Run brothers, The Wilderness, Cedar Creek, Five Forks, Brandy Station, Gaines' Mill, and Cedar Mountain. There is at least one variant for each battle as well as a campaign game to tie them together.

The battles are fought on a grand tactical map similar to, but more visually appealing than, the *Great Battles* series. Each hex is 300 meters, each turn one-hour, each unit an infantry/cavalry brigade or artillery brigade/battalion. There are some rowdy two-hex sized units, but most politely restrain themselves to the allotted 300 meters.

The only functional battle in the build used for this article, Antietam, already impresses. I-Magic has bellied up to the ambiance enhancement bar for sure. Cannoneers stuff balls down barrels before lighting their weapons, riflemen shoulder, fire, and return their muskets/rifles to the ready, brigade flags flutter in the breeze and the blue brooks babble. Unfortunately, casualties still have the "pasted-on" look prevalent in *The Great Battles of Caesar*.

There is more to this nineteenth century bloodshed than a mere facelift. "The *North vs. South* battle mechanics use a completely new and streamlined combat system that makes firepower the major cause of hits," explains Taylor. "A good bayonet or cavalry charge by a bunch of howling troopers is just the thing to sweep a shot-up enemy from the field, but charging too soon can ruin an attacker's day. A melee always ends with one or both sides hot-footing it to the rear; no hand-to-hand combats extend into the next impulse. The all-new line of sight rules demand good fields of fire and allowed us to add the 'fog of war' rules that add a whole new dimension to the game. If not intimately familiar with a battle, you *will* be surprised from time-to-time."

North vs. South uses a phased combat system similar to the *Great Battles* games. Who moves is governed by the activation of leaders, but there are significant differences. "The leaders are organized into a hierarchy," states Taylor, "and leaders at different levels have different abilities. The number of impulses the sides get every Turn is based on their army commanders. As you might guess, this gives the vicious "Stonewall" Jackson a considerable advantage over the bumbling 'Commissary' Banks at the Battle of Cedar Mountain, but provides Philip Sheridan and Jubal Early with equal numbers of impulses at the Battle of Cedar Creek."

◀ The Melee

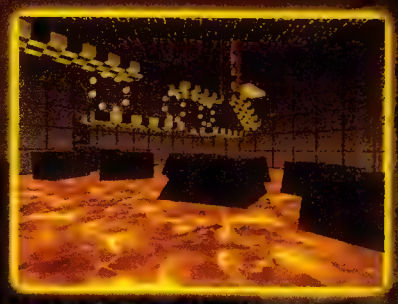
▼ The Union line breaks

Unlike the *Great Battles* games, ranged weapon volleys here tear into the enemy. There is obviously some new coding at work. The command system limits your options, and the chronological flow seems about right.

"I like the way this game's look and feel is coming together," continues Taylor. "The American Civil War is one of my favorite historical periods and I haven't been turned loose on anything from this period since doing the 5th Edition of the *Gettysburg* board game for Avalon Hill/Smithsonian way back in 1988." Civil War gamers are probably hoping Taylor's experience pays off. We'll find out when *North vs. South* hits the shelves this fall. *–Mark H. Walker*

North vs. South • Interactive Magic • Windows 95

As Max Montezuma, You've Got a Massive Family Fortune to Recover...And a Ton of Enemies Are More Than Happy to Hold On to It For You!



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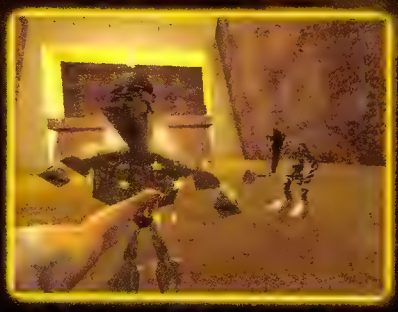

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Arokh likes his food prepared before dining ▶

Drakan: Order of the Flame

The return of Rynn's Dragon

Since being shown for the first time earlier this year, *Drakan: Order of the Flame* has been garnering a fair bit of attention…and for good reason. In the overcrowded race to build a better *Tomb Raider*, its spaciously beautiful and natural looking outdoor landscapes, mixed with more familiar claustrophobic and cavernous depths reminiscent of *Die by the Sword*, help set it apart from the other third-person 3D action games. There's also its interesting heroic duo: while the sword-wielding heroine Rynn might be nothing more than a fantasy cliché, and her bonded Red Dragon companion/mount Arokh is sure to bring forth flashbacks of *Dragonheart*, together they make an appealing and involving team.

The story takes place in an ancient world, one where warriors were bonded with mighty dragons to combat evil that plagued the land. One day, one of their own betrayed them and ended the reign of these dragon riders. He was narrowly defeated by a mighty Rider and his Dragon, Arokh. Thought dead, this traitor waited over the years, building up power in new guises, until he could start his Dark War again. Centuries later, darkness is crawling again and in a small town a rather rowdy and violence-prone young woman wakes up from a drunken stupor to find her townsfolk dead and her little brother kidnapped. Seeking revenge, she soon finds herself bonded with the legendary dragon, Arokh. With his help, she goes out to find her brother and destroy the newly risen evil that is striking the land.

◀ Here the Duo gets maligned by the game's equivalent of aerial trash

▼ Rynn strutting her stuff for the camera

The mix of soaring outdoor dragon combat and dungeon crawling gives the game a distinctive feel, greatly helped by the extremely impressive-looking 3D terrain (the game requires a 3D accelerator card). Spanning ten levels across four distinct regions, the game is designed to be one massive world. Plot points and completed goals mark places where you gain access to new areas, and all of the "levels" are essentially divided into various smaller quests that let Rynn complete her main goal. Not all the quests are pertinent to the main plot, though; developer Surreal Software has designed bonus side-quests into the game's structure that provide rewards if you feel they are worth pursuing.

Surreal is aiming for a smooth transition between Rynn's movement and Dragon flight, so the game is attempting to use the same controls for both modes of travel. Even at this early stage, the control is intuitive and easy to get into, though aiming the Dragon's breath weapon at targets, especially aerial ones, takes some practice. Being able to swoop and soar, dive and hover while attacking or merely sightseeing is powerfully seductive. Often, Rynn will find places Arokh can't enter, so she has to go it alone on foot.

While she's mainly a sword-girl, Rynn can pick up any weapon she finds, including those of fallen enemies. There are fifty weapons planned for the game, including five different breath attacks for Arokh, seven spells, bows and crossbows, and other hand-to-hand weapons like spears and axes. *Drakan* will also contain 25 different types of monsters to kill, and Rynn also encounters friendly characters who may help her along (usually through non-interactive cinematic scenes). Monsters will use various sorts of AI, with line-of-sight and three dimensional pathfinding. Every monster can be made to respond differently; for example, one may blindly chase after you, while a "smarter" one will run for reinforcements.

Drakan will have at least two multiplayer modes: the straight forward deathmatch and a new game called "Queen of the Dragon." This new twist on King of the Hill has the players scampering around the level to find a crystal that will allow them to call that level's dragon, thus giving the lucky gamer the ability to inflict death from above. Additional found magical crystals will kick the reigning Queen off her dragon and back to the low ground again. Deathmatching options will include both ground-only and ground and aerial-based levels. *Drakan* is scheduled to support up to eight players via the Interenet, a LAN or head-to-head over a modem.

With its beautiful landscape, aerial and ground-based combat, interesting mix of quests and appealing characters, *Drakan* is one of the more promising of the third-person action adventures scheduled for release in early 1999. *–Jason D'Aprile*

Drakan: Order of the Flame • Psygnosis • Windows 95

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Combat Flight Simulator

Son of Flight Sim goes to war

A Spitfire on its way to an intercept; note the new terrain system

That furball you see in the skies isn't vintage fighter planes fighting for control of the air; instead, it's pre-release boxes of WW II flight sim software duking it out over your buying dollars. All of a sudden, you hear a new engine, throttling-up on a field in Redmond, Washington. All the other combatants pause, a bit of fear in their eyes, for here comes a dreaded presence, flown by a certain bespectacled multibillionaire—Microsoft's *Combat Flight Simulator: WW II Europe Series* is entering the fray.

Once known as *Spitfire!* [*CGS+ 90*], *Combat Flight Simulator* is derived from *Flight Simulator 98*, a pedigree that has raised some eyebrows amongst sim fans who have expressed concerns about the speed of the parent game. Microsoft's Jose Pinero, Product Manager on the project, would agree with them. "One of the key components has to be a really smooth frame rate" he says. Instead of just slapping WW II planes into the existing game, they took the core game software and redid it, creating what Pinero calls essentially "the next version of *Flight Simulator*."

▲ The fixed-view cockpits are very sharp, particularly at high resolutions

▶ The virtual cockpits aren't as clean looking but allow better situational awareness

Indeed, the flight modeling is one of the features Pinero believes sets *Combat Flight Sim* apart from other WW II sims. He points out things like drag coefficients, the modeling of particle flow across all points of a plane's surface, aileron reversal, the effects of gravity on the Spitfire's carburetor, and so forth. He says the damage modeling is similarly detailed: aircraft have dozens of different "hit boxes" where damage may occur, systems can be degraded instead of just destroyed, penetration is modeled, and more.

The game will sport a typical mixture of training missions, quick action, pre-created single missions, and two campaigns (Battle of Britain or Battle Over Europe). Mission types cover a wide range, from the expected escort, surface attack, and dogfight missions to the more esoteric, like V-1 "buzz bomb" intercepts. Microsoft is also planning some non-historical missions, like flying a captured Spitfire to a London air show where you attempt to down Allied planes. The campaigns are linear and purely from the perspective of a fighter pilot—you won't gain command over additional planes as your rank increases. While the missions are fixed, there will be some random elements—enemies may appear in a different location or numbers and types of planes may change. There won't be an in-game mission editor, but the CD will include Microsoft's own mission builder tool (an Excel spreadsheet).

The terrain system is another feature that Pinero believes will set *Combat Flight Sim* apart. *Flight Sim* is known for its many scenery expansions, and *Combat Flight Sim* continues the process. In what Microsoft is calling a preview of the next generation of *Flight Sim* technology, terrain now features 16-bit color graphics and adds realistic variations in elevation. As with *Flight Sim* you'll get detailed 3D representations of some famous landmarks, this time tailored to WW II: Tower Bridge in London, the Eiffel Tower in Paris, and so on. You'll also be able to import *Flight Sim* scenery files.

The list of flyable planes that will be in the game include many of the usual suspects: FW 190A, Hurricane Mk 1, Bf 109E & G, P-51D, P-47D, and Spitfires Mk. I & IX. Somewhat surprisingly, no flyable multi-engine fighters or jets are in the game (and Pinero told us that the list above is final), but this doesn't mean that there won't be more aircraft available immediately—far from it. Because *Combat Flight Sim* shares *Flight Sim*'s open architecture, it will be able to import plane files created for that game, including hundreds of user-created planes already available on the Internet. The utility included in the pre-beta build we looked at let us pull in *Flight Sim 95* files, automatically slapping on some guns and applying a damage model. Watching a 747 (with a row of machine guns apparently floating just above its wings) attempt to dogfight is a surreal experience, but it remains to be seen whether this is a gimmick or an incredible boon to fans of air combat.

The Microsoft *Flight Sim* family hasn't seen any combat since the small WW I module was dropped from the product years back, but it seems like Microsoft is getting war-like again in a big way… notice the subtitle of the game: "WW II Europe Series." Pinero wouldn't comment on that "Series" part, but also wouldn't rule out follow-on products. With that thought in mind, fans of air combat sims are likely to watch *Combat Flight Simulator* closely. *–Scott Udell*

Combat Flight Simulator • Microsoft • Windows 95, 98, NT

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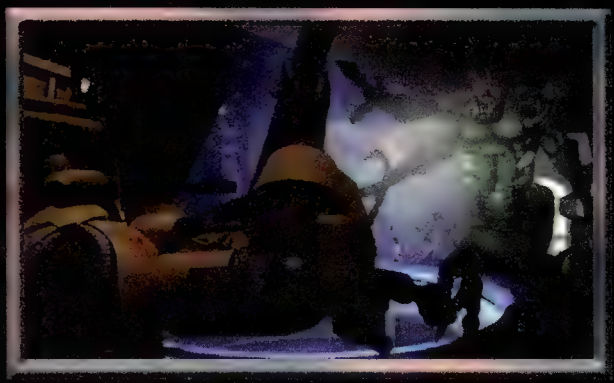

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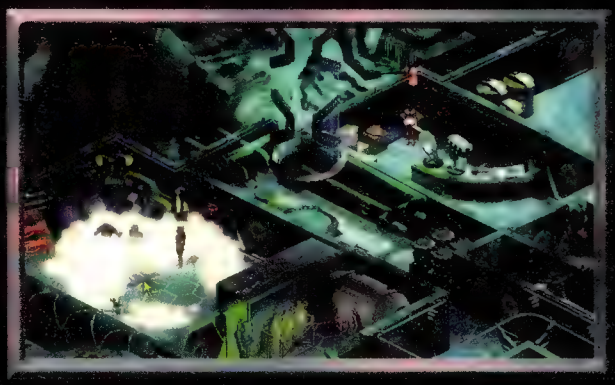

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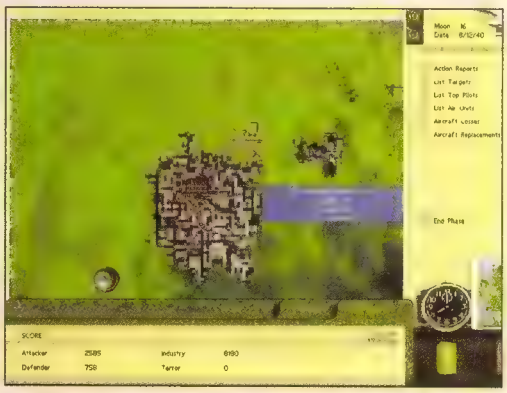
Action in the game will focus in the south of England although, as the overview map in the lower right shows, all of England and portions of Ireland and continental Europe are included as well ▶

Battle of Britain

Gary Grigsby takes to the skies once more

After mucking about in the tactical-gaming mud for his last three designs (*Steel Panthers I-III* from SSI), well-known computer wargame designer Gary Grigsby is returning to the strategic wild blue yonder for the first time since his now-ancient *USAAF*. *Battle of Britain* is not a flight simulator—you never take control of an aircraft—nor is it a tactical air combat wargame like Avalon Hill's *Achtung! Spitfire* or *Over the Reich*. Instead, it's a strategic-level wargame wherein you coordinate the air war for the British or the Germans during either the historic Battle of Britain campaign in 1940 or during a hypothetical expanded air war in 1941, one where the Germans conduct an intensive bombing of England's infrastructure. (*Bombing the Reich*, the tentatively-titled follow-on game, will cover the Allies' bombing campaign over Germany.)

The game is an interesting mix of turn-based (or, as producer Robert Waters amends, "phase-based") and continuous-time play. Before the real-timeaphobes amongst you storm the gates of publisher TalonSoft, take note—the speed can be adjusted or even completely stopped so, if things get too hairy, you can pause the game and issue orders at your leisure.



◀ While the game uses numbers—lots of numbers—to tell you things, it also takes a visual approach; here a zoomed-in view of Coltishall Airfield graphically displays the pummeling it took from German bombers the previous day

▼ Setting up a patrol; this list shows all the units within range of the patrol zone we've designated

The more involved gameplay will happen from the British viewpoint. As the British player, your day will start out with a Movement Phase wherein you can shift assets around (within limits); examine the results of the previous day's bombings, strafings, and air combat; and generally prepare your squadrons for the next day's fighting. When you're ready, you click "start" and the continuous-time Reaction Phase begins. Most of the time you will have imperfect warning and inadequate forces to deal with German bomber raids, reconnaissance flights, and fighter sweeps, so you'll have to carefully prioritize your defense, sending squadrons to those targets you think are key to your opponent's strategy while holding some units in reserve just in case you're wrong. Once the day is over and the last German plane has returned to its base, the Reaction Phase ends and you'll return to the British Movement Phase for assessment and the next day's movement orders.

Historically there was little German air planners could do after the raids formed up and left for England, beyond waiting for the raids to return, and the game models this. Most of the German player's work occurs during the German Planning Phase. You examine potential targets, look over your available resources, and decide what you're going to hit today. As it's a lot of work to plan a full day's activities, you may opt to plan just a few specific raids and let your computerized staff handle the rest. You may let the AI plan everything or just the activities of a particular type of plane or a particular unit; after it's done you can examine these plans, modifying or deleting any raids the AI has put together. Planning a raid consists of more than just picking a target and selecting the units to use; you can also designate secondary targets, modify routes, and select altitudes.

Once your raids are all planned you hit start and watch the day unfold. Unlike the British player, all your work is done—for you, the Reaction Phase is observation only. Once the last raid has returned you can analyze the results of the day's activities and get ready to conduct the next day's planning.

The game will feature over 500 historical pilots, each rated by skills, morale, and fatigue. The Battle of Britain portion of the game will feature the historical aircraft and units of the actual battle, while the hypothetical '41 air campaign will feature planes that would have historically become available for such an operation. Current plans call for single day training scenarios, week-long scenarios focusing on highlights of the battle, or the full campaigns; TalonSoft may also add some mid-level month long scenarios. Multiplayer will be available via play-by-e-mail, with each side exchanging phases (remember, only the British player is active during the continuous-time Reaction Phase, so there's no need for both players to be connected at this point).

Wargaming has its popular fields, and most publishers stick with those tried-and-true formulas. By focusing on an air war, even a historically interesting and significant one, TalonSoft and Grigsby/Brors are taking a risk in today's market. It will be interesting to see how their baby flies with gamers when it takes off later this year. *–Scott Udell*

Battle of Britain • TalonSoft • Windows 95

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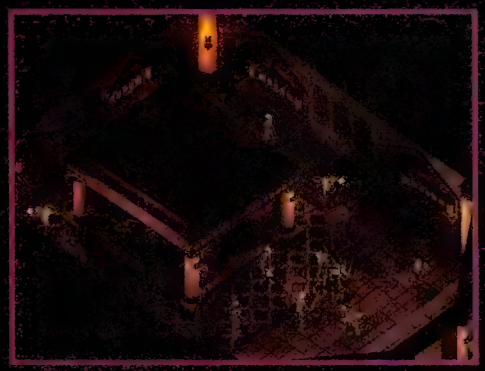

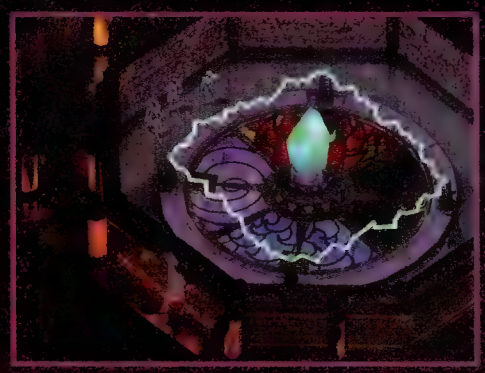

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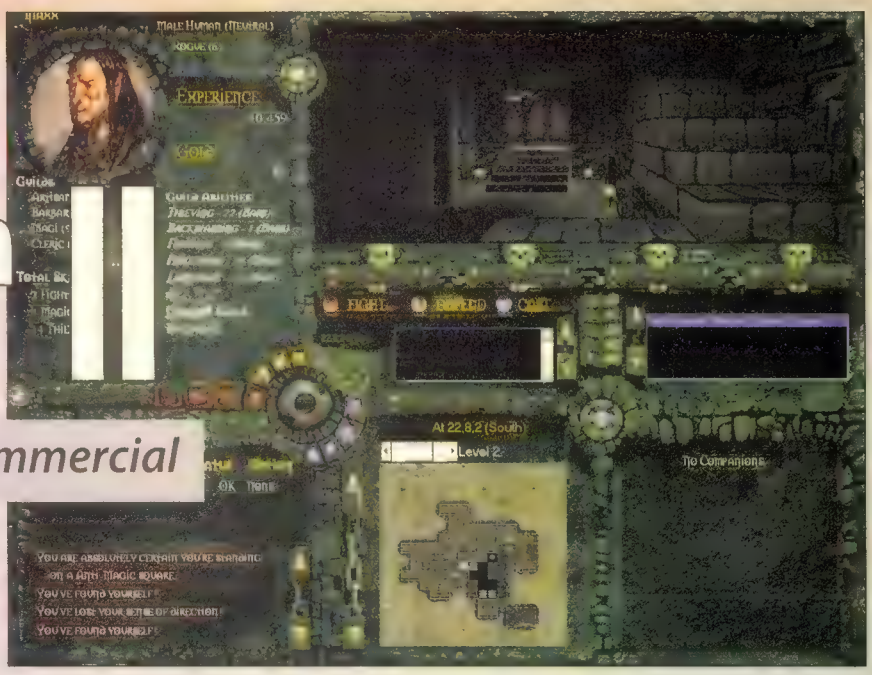
An encounter! 7 slaves, 9 slaves, 9 slaves



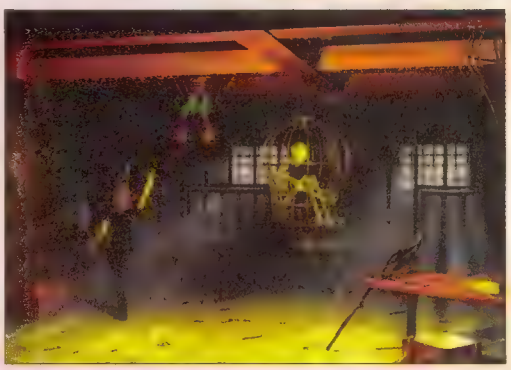
Mordor II

A labor of love goes commercial

VB Designs, based in Bellevue, Washington, was founded about two years ago as a software development firm specializing in Visual Basic technology and offering various products and services. At that time, CEO David Allen began work on a little role-playing game called *Mordor*, a rather low-key project which he admits was then a labor of love. Since then, in his not-so-copious free time, he and a small team of developers created *Mordor II* (a working title), which was so well-received via the Internet that he began seriously looking for a publisher to distribute the game. He shopped around and spoke to many and was not very happy with the potential relationships he encountered. "Most publishing companies are dicks. You can quote me on that," said an obviously outspoken Allen. "I talked to a lot of the big names, and most of them are like used car salesmen." Finally he happened upon Interplay's Black Isle Studios' Division Director Feargus Urquhart, who liked the title and recommended Interplay publish it.

Since finding a publisher, *Mordor II* has undergone a major face-lift, bringing it up to snuff by today's technological standards. It's a real-time tile-based single and multiplayer role-playing game; however, its roots are steeped in the hard-core pen and paper RPGs of yore. You know the story: a town is ravaged by unleashed beasts issuing forth from the bowels of the underworld, an underworld you and your party must clear level after level while finding gold, treasure, armor, weapons, Wheaties, and completing subquests. You are one of the normal RPG classes, Paladin, Rogue, Mage, yadda yadda, with a specific alignment and evolving skill-set, *à la* most *Wizardry*-like offerings. Here the storyline has to do with the magic of the land being stolen by the beasts, and you are confronted with the task of destroying them and thwarting the Biggest Baddest Opponent named Ku'tan Jenal. "The Ku'tan is the most advanced group of protectorate magic users and warriors," describes Allen. "They're like the Navy Seals of medieval times."

▶ **The seer here will help you locate people or items in the maze**



▼ **Confinement—where the evil make license plates**

It is tempting to condescendingly toss this title into the "old-world-RPG" box, which is not a bad thing, since many, many die-hard fans exist—we *like* to slash monsters and grab stuff—but there are a few things that distinguish it. It is a very large world, with over 500 items and monsters and over 30 levels (roughly 45X45 each). Unlike *Wizardry* and *Might and Magic*, *Mordor II* utilizes real 3D rendered monster objects right in the maze—almost like *Quake* characters. And while you won't see more than a handful of *Quake* antagonists rushing you at once, the *Mordor* engine will support over 40 critters mowing you down at the same time—all 3D objects, all individually animated with individual AI. You can create as many party members as you like (up to about 32), both at the beginning and any time within the game.

What Allen really believes will grab an audience, however, are the multiplayer aspects. Each game will ship with server software and a game editor that will enable players to create their own RPG worlds. When a player wishes to join a game on someone's server, he or she will be able to download a plug-in for whatever world is running. You can replace all the textures if you like, creating almost any ambiance imaginable. If you have the capability of creating 3D objects, you can even make your own monsters to import. Allen thinks that within a week of the product shipping, there will be hundreds and hundreds of *Mordor* servers running full-time, 24-7, with the heartiest of the hearty able to handle up to 32 players.

They will be giving exponential control to the people who run the servers to prevent hackers, cheaters, and the like. The servers will be able to track every character that's been in there, every transaction, every public message (private messages remain private); you can banish users, and if they repent you can re-admit them. People can e-mail the servers, and leave mail for off-line players on the billboard.

While many whine that nothing is new nowadays, there are also those who prefer slipping into the comfortable RPG shoes of antiquity. They and anyone else curious about what Black Isle Studios describes as "everything good about *Quake* and *Ultima Online*," will be able to partake of *Mordor II* this winter. *–Cindy Yans*

Mordor II • Interplay • Windows 95

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Birth of the Federation

Troi in the sky with latinum

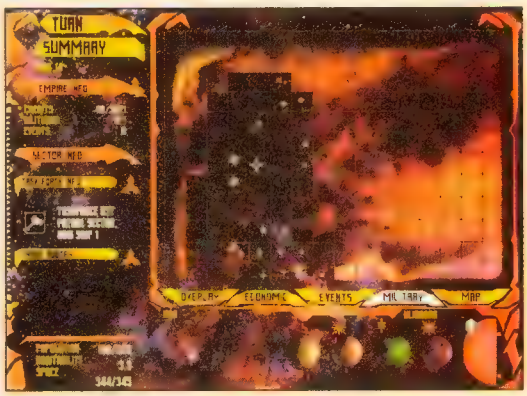
Most folks know that the *Star Trek*'s Federation is a (mostly) benevolent democratic society, expanding only via peaceful means. Long-time Trekkers understand, however, that existence is a tricky thing, that in some parallel planes and mirror universes the Federation is not so nice. What would it be like to take the reigns of such a Federation, to guide it down a path where the Prime Directive is conquest instead of non-interference? Or perhaps it would be fun to take control of one of the Federation's classic foils—say the Klingons, Romulans, Ferengi or Cardassians—and use their strengths to grow an empire to rival those do-gooders in funny uniforms. Sound like an interesting game? Well, that's exactly what MicroProse is attempting to create with the upcoming *Star Trek: The Next Generation Birth of the Federation*.

Hard-core Trekkers take note at that *Next Generation* part; in the land of Ferengi-like business dealings, Paramount doles out *Star Trek* licenses on a show-by-show, movie-by-movie basis, and a product with one license can't use characters, ships, or races from another. What this means for *Birth of the Federation* is that the Christopher Pikes of your early Federation will be driving ships that look more like those of your Jean Luc Picards. While the cognoscenti may gripe, it will have one positive benefit—no pesky Organians to limit military activities in your corner of the galaxy.

With that in mind, dive on in to *Birth*, not as the captain of a starship but as the President of the Federation, Chancellor of the Klingon High Council, or leader of one of the other major races in the game. The most obvious comparison is *Master of Orion* and other such build-your-space-empire games, and that's certainly valid—*Birth* has many of the elements you'd expect from a game in the genre: explore space, start new colonies, exploit resources, conduct research, organize trade and manage your economic and military development, and, as you run into new peoples, act with diplomatic aplomb or militant bluntness. While pre-game setup determines the technology level you have in the beginning, you always start with a single star system and a couple of ships and build from there. Growth will occur as a matter of course: populations, wealth (in the form of credits or latinum), energy, tech levels, colonies, and more. The game progresses by turns, with tactical combat occurring when fleets meet on the strategic map.

While also turn-based, the tactical combat differs from other like-minded games in that it plays out in 3D. Basically, each side issues orders for the ships in their fleets then executes the turn, watching a few seconds of combat play out in a number of different views; if you miss something the first time around, or you wish to examine an enemy's maneuver from a different viewpoint, you can replay that phase. If micromanaging a space battle isn't your cup of Earl Grey tea, you can either set the computer to control things while you sit back and watch or, if time is short, just have the computer instantly calculate the results of the battle.

Diplomacy is the key to the Federation in the TV shows, and it can be a tool you'll use in the game too. From trade agreements to treaties, the Foggy Bottom-types from all the races should have plenty to choose from (you can even tempt minor races to join with you… that is, if you don't just conquer them outright). With trade agreements you get trade routes, similar to the internal supply routes; these are lines across which supplies and goods move automatically (no need to manage the milk runs yourself). Of course, such commercial lanes are tempting targets….



◀ Each race gets its own distinctive look; here the Klingon Empire is just getting started

▼ Setting production levels; notice the production queue on the right

While the core gameplay is important, the thing that will really set *Birth* apart for many are the *Star Trek* overlays. Even in the alpha we played the *Next Generation* look-and-feel is already evident, be it in the PADD-like displays or the background sounds and music. We counted some 40 different ship models from the show, with a fair sampling from each major race and a few thrown in for flavor (can you say "assimilation"?). Each of the races will have a different look, from the Federation's cool blues and rounded edges to the Klingons' violent reds and jagged look.

Obviously, MicroProse hopes to appeal to fans of both *Star Trek* and turn-based space strategy games. It's been a long time since we've seen a mixture of the two forms, and never has their been an "official" one (*NetTrek* doesn't count); whether this one will be a game that "Boldly goes where no one's gone before" or just a problem Tribble is something we'll find out only after a few more months of development and some extensive gameplay. *–Scott Udell*

Star Trek: The Next Generation–Birth of the Federation • MicroProse • Windows 95

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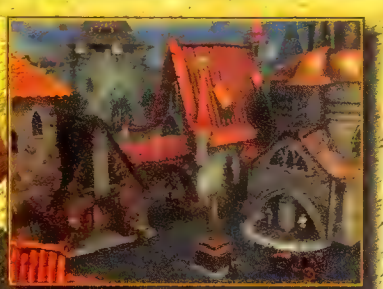

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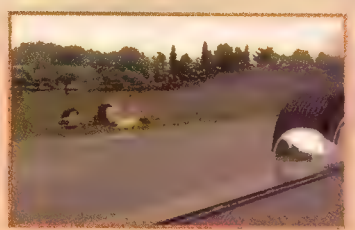
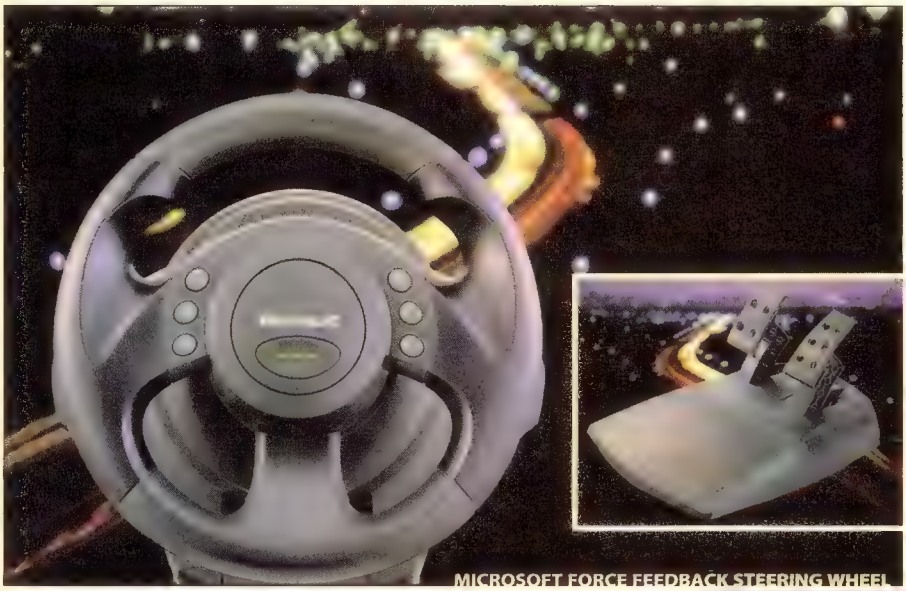


New wheels keep on turning

Microsoft and ACT Labs mosey down the controller less traveled



MICROSOFT FORCE FEEDBACK STEERING WHEEL

Another pair of steering wheels have appeared on store shelves, an inexpensive one from ACT Labs and an expensive force-feedback one from Microsoft. Excepting the force-feedback, both provide near-equal functionality with wildly different costs and feels.

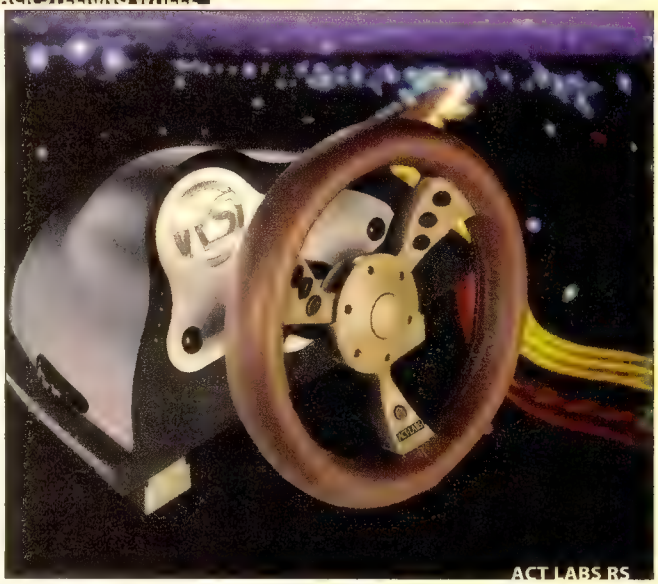
The RS wheel from ACT Labs is a full-featured controller that'll only set you back a suggested retail price of $69.95. It has seven buttons on the face of the wheel, a four-way gamepad that's relatively useless (it gives little feedback as to the direction being pressed), an F1-style shifter and a beefy set of pedals.

While the pseudo-leather covering on the wheel makes it feel good to the touch, the wheel itself suffers from a fatal design flaw—the spokes are in the wrong place. Rather than be at the three and nine o'clock positions, they're too high, sitting at the two and 10 o'clock positions. While you'd normally wrap your thumbs around the spokes, you end up either holding your hands too high on the wheel to be comfortable or your thumbs sort of dangle in the middle of the wheel.

The overall feeling of the wheel is one of cheapness. The switches—particularly a rocking paddle switch on the back of the wheel for gear changes—are flimsy and loose. The pedals, while being on a large non-slip base, feature coarse action that may or may not improve over time and use. The clamp used to secure the wheel to your desk is exposed metal, which could scratch, and is somewhat clumsy to use.

One slick engineering feature of the wheel is its ability to accept cartridges that allow it to be used on multiple platforms. If you have, say, a Nintendo 64, you'd be able to use the exact same wheel by plugging in a cartridge, which has all of the electronics and connectors attached to it. This feature alone may make it worthwhile to all of the multi-platform gamers out there.

However flawed the wheel may be, you have to balance this against its low cost. With most competitors anywhere from $30 to $150 more, the ACT Labs RS may be worth a glance.



ACT LABS RS

On the high-end of the steering wheel spectrum is the Microsoft Force Feedback Steering Wheel. It features a beautifully ergonomic design for both the wheel and the pedals. The wheel boasts perfect placement of all elements, the spokes are at the proper race-wheel location, and the rubber wheel covering feels good to the touch. (Once again, we see the skill with which Microsoft selects building materials that have an expensive and high-quality feel—other stick manufacturers should take notice.) The pedals feature a pseudo-drilled look and do not slip across the floor. Their action is fairly smooth, and feel more "real" than the ones from Thrustmaster. The clamp that attaches the wheel to your desk is superbly engineered, allowing you to set to tighten it into place on your desk, then use a quick-release to easily remove it.

The big draw of the wheel is its support for force-feedback, those shakes, jolts and tensions that are supposed to make games feel more realistic. There's an obvious reason to do a wheel with force-feedback—driving is all about "feeling" forces through the wheel. Once again, though, the dearth of quality force-enabled software makes it almost impossible to evaluate the SideWinder wheel's overall quality. Most of the games tested with the wheel tend to fall into the same category—lots of vibrating on different track surfaces with little feel of the forces associated with the physics of driving. This tends to turn the wheel into an incredibly expensive wheel-shaped marital aid rather than a tool for getting the best laps out of your simulation or physics-heavy action game.

However, as with the SideWinder force-feedback joystick, the wheel is still beautifully designed and functional with or without forces enabled. Unfortunately that functionality comes at a cost—this wheel is expensive. Seriously expensive. It's MSRP is $209.95, though the price does include the full versions of *Monster Truck Madness 2* and *CART Precision Racing*.

Until there are enough high-quality force-feedback devices on the market, developers have no real reason to spend the time needed to produce seriously good force effects. Those who wish to be on the bleeding edge of hardware have to be content with half-assed force implementations. Ultimately, our final evaluation of the SideWinder wheel is the same as that of most of the force-feedback joysticks—it feels gimmicky rather than essential. *–Steve Bauman*

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The Obsidian 2 X-24 is the ultimate Voodoo2 board—but at a cost

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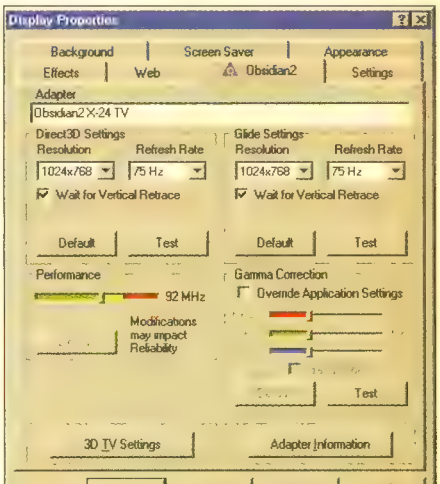

The control panels are easy to use

There's no denying that the Quantum 3D Obsidian2 X-24 is the ultimate Voodoo2 board on the market. The main draw of the product is that it's a single PCI card that actually consists of two separate 12MB Voodoo2 cards running in what's called Scan-Line Interleaving (SLI) mode. In SLI mode, each Voodoo2 card renders every other line displayed on your screen, which in theory would double the card's performance, with the extra memory of the two cards allowing higher resolutions in 3D accelerated games. Normally, SLI mode requires two separate PCI Voodoo2s connected by an internal cable; in the X-24, they've consolidated two complete Voodoo2 cards in one.

While the performance of the card isn't exactly double that of a regular Voodoo2 card, you can definitely run games at higher resolutions with superior performance. With the X-24, you can run most 3D accelerated games at 1024x768 resolution with little speed hit over running them at 640x480 on a standard Voodoo2. While there's arguably little benefit from playing 3D shooters like *Quake II* and *Unreal* at the higher resolutions, running a flight simulator such as beta versions of *Combat Flight Simulator* and *F-16 Aggressor* at the higher resolutions allows greater clarity of the cockpit gauges and better visual fidelity of distant objects.

Performance at lower resolutions, though, seems disappointingly average on *Quake II* and *Unreal*, though *Turok* shows huge gains [see chart]. Part of the reason is that the card's performance is dependent on your processor speed—it's often sitting around waiting for your Pentium II to process a scene. As you can see with our *Unreal* tests, going from a 266MHz to 400MHz machine makes a big difference. There is no current processor that maxes out the card.

The X-24 has a now-standard Voodoo2 control panel that is simple to use. You can alter all of the usual Voodoo2 settings, such as brightness and refresh rates, and for tweakers out there, you can overclock the card (run it faster than Quantum, or 3Dfx, intended, which is not recommended). Of additional use to some gamers is the X-24's TV-out feature that supports both composite and S-Video output.

There are only two problems with the X-24. While it has the advantage of being a single card, that benefit may be outweighed by the fact it's an enormous card that you have difficulty fitting in your case—it's a three-quarter size card that's almost as long as most motherboards. It also noticeably sags in a tower case due to the two Voodoo processors and memory chips being located on the outer edge of the card. Whether or not that causes problems down the road remains to be seen.

A bigger problem is the price. With the recent price slashing of regular 12MB Voodoo2 cards, the X-24's street price of over $500 makes it almost $200 more than two cards running in SLI mode. It also comes with no free games, just 14 demos of the usual suspects (*Incoming*, *Turok*, etc.).

However, if you're short of available PCI slots, or want the ultimate in Voodoo2 performance, the X-24 is the only game in town. If you look at things solely in terms of price vs. performance, it comes up short. For convenience and integrated design, it's tops. –*Steve Bauman*

A game like F-16 Aggressor looks pretty spectacular 3D accelerated at 1024x768

Serious Performance

Quake II	640x480	800x600	1024x768
X-24 (Glide)	95.1	90.1	68
Monster 3D II (Glide)	88.5	63.8	N/A

Turok	640x480	800x600
Monster 3D II (D3D)	69.3	49.5
X-24 (D3D)	106.0	94.6
Monster 3D II (Glide)	98	N/A
X-24 (Glide)	137.9	N/A

Unreal	640x480	800x600	1024x768
Monster 3D II (Glide)	48.22	26.94	N/A
X-24 (Glide)	53.34	50.39	35.91

	640x480	800x600	1024x768
266MHz Pentium II	33.17	31.10	26.09
400MHz Pentium II	53.34	50.39	35.91

All figures expressed in frames-per-second — Testing by Jonathan Greenberg

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VINTNOR

Look at this! I've got grapes rotting on the vine! With the shipbuilders on strike, I can't ship my wine to the rest of the Empire. My warehouse is full, and boy do I have a hangover...

GLADIATOR

I've got to get to the Temple of Mars to make a sacrifice before tonight's contest in the Coliseum. I think I'm losing my touch. Last night the lions nearly took my head off! If only I hadn't missed that last lesson at the Gladiator School...

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COMPUTER GAMING WORLD

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SOLDIER

March, march, march...Got to keep on the lookout for the Barbarians. Oh yeah, and rumor has it the Carthaginians may be on the move again. Wait! Is that a camel over there?

PRIEST

I don't know what the world's coming to these days. Young people run wild in the streets, forgetting all about the gods. I don't know where I'm going to find enough Vestal Virgins this year...

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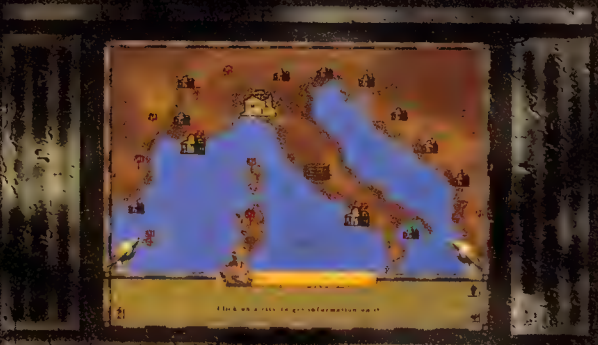
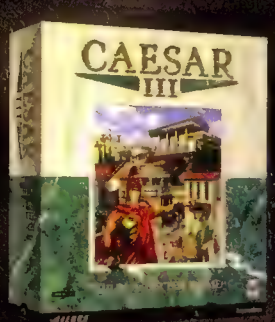


- Use the trade map to connect your city – and its goods – to the rest of the Empire.



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Impressions

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CAESAR III

BUILD A BETTER ROME

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Police Quest: SWAT 2

Another day, another real-time strategy game

If you follow the computer game industry at all, the fact that the *Police Quest* series has gone real-time is not breaking news. As this trend continues to sweep the industry (rumors of a real-time version of tic-tac-toe have not yet been confirmed), it's time to face reality—some games do not fit the genre well. *SWAT 2* has some nifty features but they are offset by an ill-fitting real-time implementation.

Players can play the game as a SWAT team commander or sign up with the Five Eyes, a terrorist group striving to achieve peace on Earth by killing all opposition. Both sides have fifteen separate missions arranged in a linear format. The plot , however, is tenuous at best; there is no real thread to hold the game together. Many missions don't even have to be completed successfully to advance the plot; terrorists usually can just leave the map and move onto the next game .

The missions themselves are well-designed and varied. The police scenarios include a failed bank robbery, an assassination attempt, and a riot. To carry these out the player, is provided with a full array of goodies for bringing terrorists to justice. Submachine guns, pistols, tear gas, riot gear, and entry explosives are all there. Throw in a tank and a helicopter and we have all the makings of a good party. These weapons are not just for show; all are useful in the correct situation. For instance, the helicopter can be used to keep an eye on things or move troops and the tank is great for remodeling a criminal hideout.

On the terrorist side, there are a completely different set of missions. You can raid the headquarters of a rival gang for their weapons or attempt to free a fellow bad guy being transported to prison. The Five Eyes is a smaller organization that lacks niceties such as helicopters and nuclear weapons, but hand grenades and booby traps are provided. This makes the strategy for the terrorist side very different from that of a SWAT team.

Both sides can customize their forces. The player has a certain amount of funds to equip and train their troops. The creation of a balanced team for an unknown situation can be difficult, and there is no way to run back to headquarters and grab that sniper rifle in the middle of a mission.

A major limitation with *SWAT 2* is the lack of flexibility of the engine. Multi-story buildings exist in the game, but you can only occupy on floor at a time. Troops cannot be placed on the roof of buildings that have an accessible interior. The level designs work around these limitations, but they don't help the game's realism.

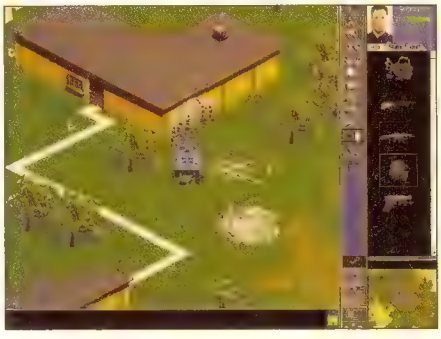
There are additional problems as well. Criminals that reache an exit point on the edge of a map simply vanish, even if there are a dozen police officers five feet from him. The terrorists also have invincible escape vehicles; police can shoot at one for minutes. The sound of glass shattering is heard, but at the click of a button the car will be merrily on its way.

Another weakness in the game is quirky AI. One expects erratic behavior from the criminally insane, but when a group of police let a group of terrorists slip by because they're filling an invincible escape vehicle full of lead, one has to wonder if they are following standard operating procedure. Also, if you order a unit to fire on an enemy the enemy will automatically return fire, even if they are on the opposite side of a brick wall.

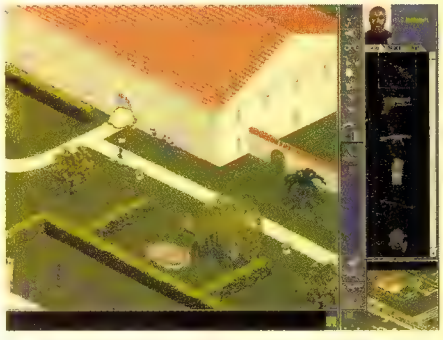
The idea behind *SWAT 2* is sound and does not succumb too much to the *Clone & Conquer* mentality pervading the market. However, the poor plot line and number of flaws soon crop up, hindering the value of this product. This game is a mediocre one; its somewhat unique nature give it a certain appeal, but most mainstream gamers may want to look elsewhere.

–Ryan Brush

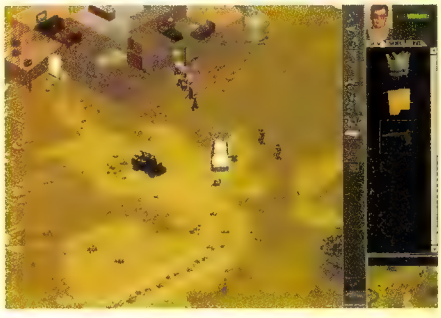
Helicopters are great for moving troops to surprising locations



If they won't open the door, just make a new one



When no tanks are around, entry explosives are the next best thing



The police are strangely picky about things like growing marijuana in the garden

★★⯪☆☆

Police Quest: SWAT 2

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Requirements: Windows 95, 133MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB of RAM, 4X CD-ROM

Multiplayer: 2-8 players, Internet, LAN, modem

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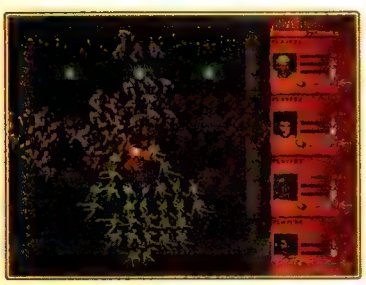

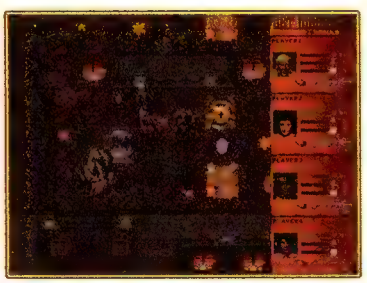

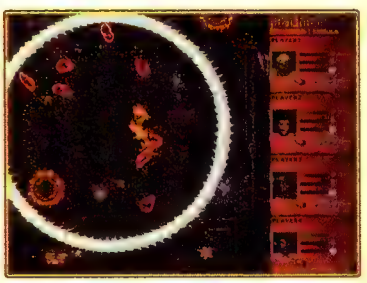

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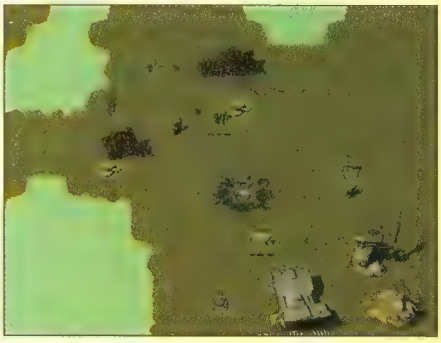
Cyberstorm 2: Corporate Wars

It's not just stock options any more

The only ore this mine will get is its own scrap metal

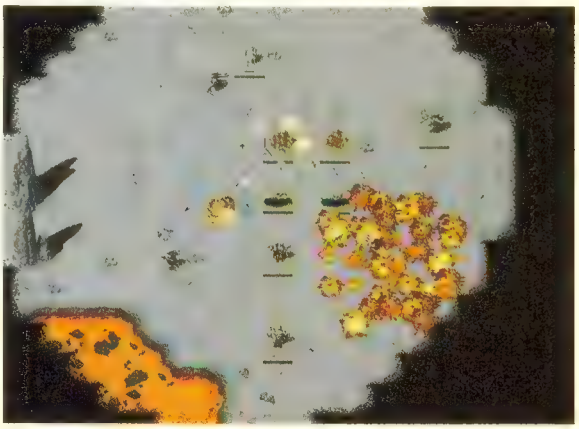


Head-on charges don't work well against enemy turrets

In *Cyberstorm 2: Corporate Wars*, eight interstellar corporations are battling over a key jump point that allows expansion to the rest of the galaxy. Each takes a different approach as they vie for interstellar domination. These approaches include powerful scanners, strong defense, and sheer numbers. Although the sides are quite similar and have many common units, different strategies are needed to do well with different corporations.

Cyberstorm 2 features real-time and turn-based modes, one of which you select when starting a game. The same interface and gameplay mechanics are used in both modes, which leads to some minor problems—options useful in turn-based play can get in the way of a real-time battle. For example, units can be put in different modes, such as attack and pursue or automatically fire on the best target; unfortunately, if you are in the wrong mode while another corporation tries a hostile takeover, your units will sit there and happily be destroyed. Although the game was originally intended as real-time, the turn-based mode is executed much better, and meshes more smoothly with the rest of the game.

A player looking for a fast-paced game will probably not be interested in the details needed to play in campaign mode. Much of your time spent playing the campaign actually occurs outside the actual missions. Players earn money destroying enemies and mining ore and build their forces so they can kill more enemies and mine more ore. This is where the micromanagement portion of the game comes into play. The standard 3569 Herc comes with armor, shields, a drive system, a reactor, scanners, life support, and anti-lock breaks. All of these can be upgraded, and there are different subclasses of each. Each vehicle needs to be controlled by a Bioderm pilot, of which there are several types with different abilities. On top of that over 170 different weapons are included in the game. To get all of these goodies one invests funds in the scientific endeavor of one's choice and chooses which buildings to upgrade. All this happens before you even start a mission. The sheer number of options makes it extremely difficult to build a strong fighting force. Hard-core gamers will like this, but many will be overwhelmed by the complexity.



When in trouble, use high explosives

Overall, though, the campaign is well-implemented. There are some scripted missions, but it is largely dynamic. You are given a choice of missions; your performance determines where your corporation stands for the next battle.

The game's artificial intelligence does pretty well in most situations, though it is often aided by the crutch of superior numbers. In many competing games, the computer uses the same approach as the villains in a Steven Seagal movie: Hey, let's just attack him one at a time! Not so here; the enemy attacks in large, coordinated strike forces. The terrain also plays a significant role in strategy. Lines of sight are obscured by hills and the speed of movement over different terrain types varies greatly. *Cyberstorm 2* only allows players to work with a handful of units at a time, so the really complex strategies of hardcore turn-based games are not possible. However, there are enough environmental factors and a challenging computer opponent to make the game quite interesting.

The biggest drawback to the game is aesthetic—the graphics are a step backwards from the original game and simply aren't up to the standards of other games in the genre. The explosions and units are decent, but the fog of war looks bad and the lasers are nothing but colored lines. Also, the terrain is bland and two-dimensional looking. If spectacular graphics are what you're looking for, there isn't much here.

Overall, *Cyberstorm 2* is a surprisingly good game. With many variables, a solid campaign mode and difficult computer opponents, the replay value is excellent. Sub-par graphics and the amount of micromanagement needed to design a force may scare off some gamers, but if you want something with a little more depth, it's definitely worth a look. *–Ryan Brush*

★★★½☆

Cyberstorm 2: Corporate Wars

Sierra • www.sierra.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 133 MHz Pentium or higher, 24 MB RAM, 4X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2-8 players, Internet (via won.net), LAN, modem, serial

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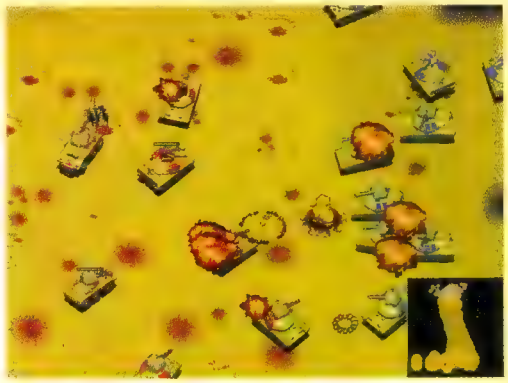
Tribal Rage

Bad jokes 1, Playability 0



Building lots of tanks is still a sure way to win

Humor is finally making its entrance into the real-time strategy genre with Talonsoft's *Tribal Rage*. Having a *Redneck Rampage* atmosphere, the game drops much of what we've come to expect from its genre, trying to compensate with bad jokes—unfortunately, this creates problems that seriously hurt the game's potential.

Some of the flaws in *Tribal Rage* are forgivable in a humor-oriented game—a lack of plot, for instance. However, other flaws severely hinder playability. Unit routing, for instance, is extremely poor, rendering even the waypoint feature useless. If you select a series of waypoints and the unit can't reach one easily, it will skip it and go onto the next waypoint then try to find its way back to the one it missed. If there is a wall between a vehicle and its destination, the unit often crawls along that wall rather than simply going around. Flanking maneuvers in which half of your force wanders through the enemy base just aren't very effective.

If the above problems aren't enough, *Tribal Rage's* computer opponents are not only as dumb as rocks, they are not much more mobile. Even enemy units that run out of ammo are content to sit in one place and be demolished. Don't bother protecting your base; it won't be attacked.

Bikers and Cyborgs resolve their differences the hard way

Yes, there are a few positive features, but not many. It comes with the requisite map editor and a vehicle editor that allows you to add existing weapons to an existing chassis. Now you can put that turret on that old Chevy Nova like you've always wanted to. The units and weapons in the game aren't taken too seriously. Bazooka wielding grandmothers and dreaded lobbyists that convince units to change sides are among the most interesting. It is these few features that salvage the game from an even lower rating.

If you're looking for a light-hearted experience that's more of a bad joke than a game, *Tribal Rage* may have some value for you. However, if elements like strategy or graphics or plotline appeal to you, this is a game you will want to skip. *–Ryan Brush*

★½☆☆☆

Tribal Rage

TalonSoft • www.talonsoft.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 100 MHz Pentium or higher, 16 MB RAM, 4X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2-8 players, Internet, LAN, modem

Small Soldiers: Squad Commander

It's not just for grown-ups anymore

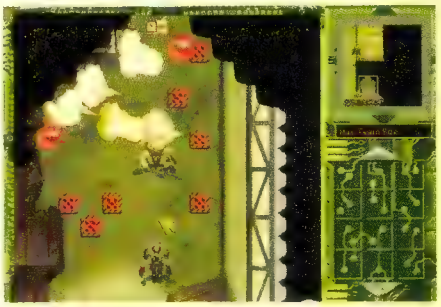
With their latest release, Hasbro Interactive has given us a rarity in the gaming industry: a product designed for kids instead of the office computer network. *Small Soldiers: Squad Commander* offers nothing new in the realm of graphics or strategic depth, and its plot is almost as ridiculous as its premise, but for the right age group, it is an enjoyable game.

Squad Commander is based on the movie *Small Soldiers*. It is a real-time strategy game by virtue of its top down view and multiple units to be controlled. Each side has six different kinds of units. The strategic impact of these units is determined by ability ratings such as speed, attack range, and armor. However, the amount of actual strategy in the game is rather limited; squashing units with doors and hitting short-range enemies with long-range weapons are the main tactics in the game. There is not any base construction in the game, either; players obtain units from toy-boxes. The focus is shifted from strategy to small puzzles. These puzzles are quite simple, usually involving the use of common objects in uncommon ways (yes, there is a reason why the tennis-ball launcher looks eerily like an artillery piece). Most adult players will find the game too easy to be enjoyable.

Explosive tennis balls aren't for practicing your serve

Graphically, *Squad Commander* is passable, but not extraordinary. There is such a close-up view of the map that only a few units are usually visible. Also, unless mousetraps the size of washing machines were intentional, the scale is quite inconsistent. The list of flaws in the game continues, but poor AI, cartoonish graphics, and lack of multiplayer may not be noticed by the players for which the game is intended. If you compare the list of features of this game to almost any other real-time strategy game, it stacks up poorly; however, the younger audience probably would not make use of unit formations and waypoints, anyway.

Small Soldiers is designed to be a light game for kids, and here it succeeds. It lacks depth in many areas and should be foregone by gamers looking for something serious or stimulating. On the other hand, it might not be a bad way to introduce the proverbial hyperactive eight-year-old to puzzle solving and strategy. *–Ryan Brush*

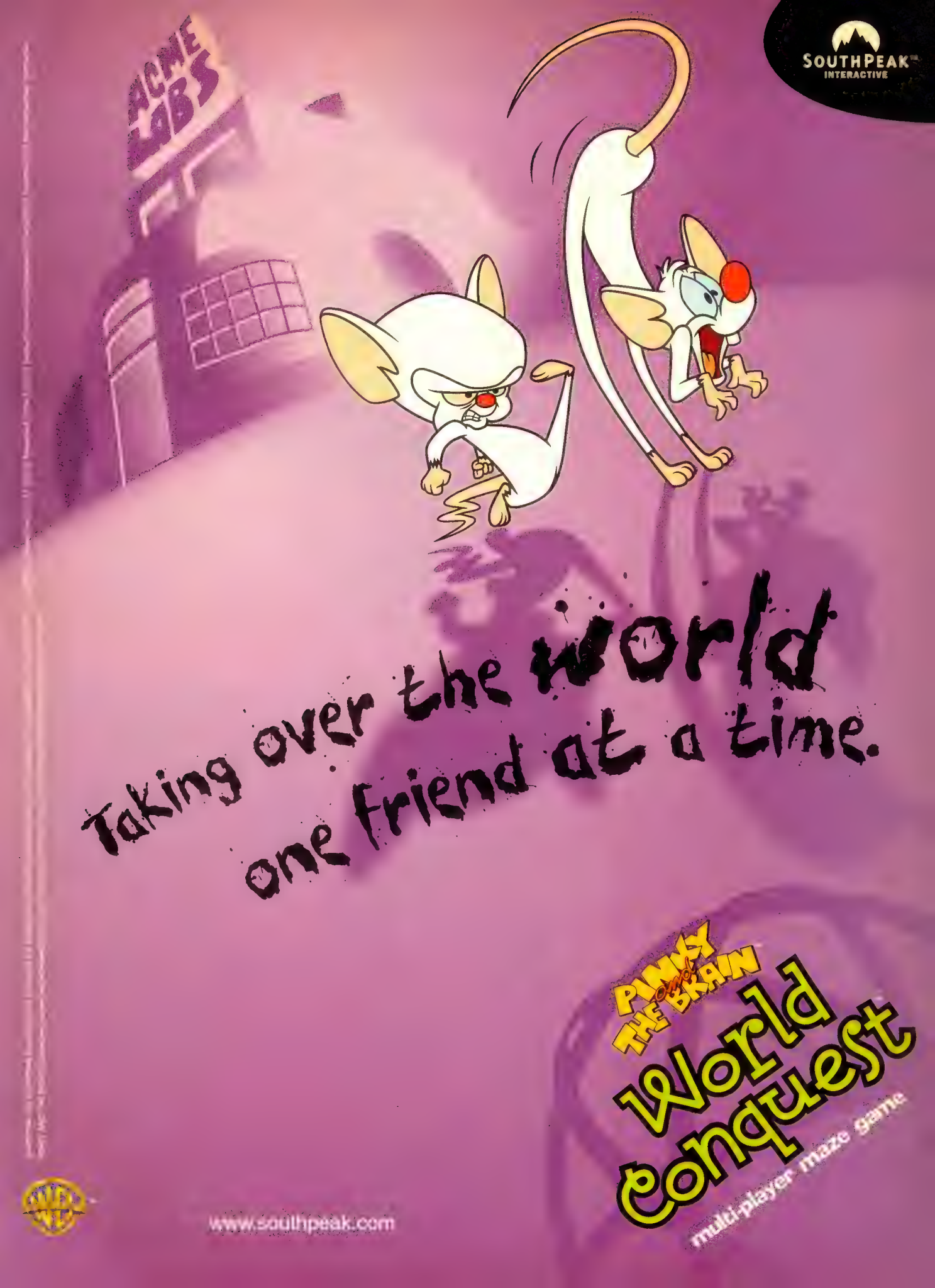


Soldiers have an amazing aptitude for stumbling on traps

★★★☆☆

Small Soldiers: Squad Commander

Hasbro Interactive • www.hasbrointeractive.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 100 MHz Pentium or higher, 16 MB RAM, 4X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: None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Waterloo Campaign

Another fine reason to hang on to that Mac

By Design's evolving series of tactical battle games has been a favorite of many Macintosh wargamers willing to forego snazzy graphics and sound in favor of solid game play. *Waterloo Campaign* is the latest installment of their engine and it's been honed to a razor sharp edge.

There continues to be a home grown, labor of love aspect to this Mac-only product. Quatre Bras, Ligny, Wavre, and Waterloo may be fought separately or as a continuing campaign. The battle results have a direct bearing on latter encounters. Players do not need rigidly to follow history; at Quatre Bras for example, the French may choose to fight a screening action in order to send the bulk of their forces to Ligny to crush the Prussians.

Improvements from past installments have been directed mainly toward increasing the ease of use of the interface. There is now a very functional toolbar that eliminates the need to use many keyboard commands. By using a lasso function it's now possible to select a multitude of units and give them all the same command. This is a godsend when managing an area of little activity where just basic movement commands are needed.

The strategic view allows quick jumps around the map

Previous formations of line, column, and square are retained. In addition, much to the delight of *grognards*, skirmishers have been added. Fortunately for the rest of us, the skirmishers may be easily recalled to their units.

The game's A.I. has improved with stronger offensive play. The computer's level of aggressiveness may be varied. Players may also choose to have the computer play exactly as the historical battles unfolded.

Less effort has been spent with refining the graphics. Basic cartoon representations of the general unit types remain. The graphics are functional if not as pretty as current PC offerings.

...by Design continues to steadily evolve their solid tactical engine. The new campaign aspects work well and the system screams to be adapted to the American Civil War. ...by Design only sells direct and may be reached at 800.527.7472, or email DesignInc@aol.com. *–Chuck Klimushyn*

The lasso function is a godsend for managing large numbers of units

★★★★☆

Waterloo Campaign

...by Design, Inc. • DesignInc@aol.com • Requirements: MacOS, System 7.x or higher, 68040 or higher, 8MB RAM • Multiplayer: 2 players, Modem, play-by-email, hot seat

Hollywood Mogul

You'll never work in this town again

With the "pop" variety of culture being the most dominant in many of our lives, it's surprising that few developers have produced strategy games focusing on its major industries. The new 2.0 version of *Hollywood Mogul*, as with its previous version, tackles the film industry. While it may appeal most to those who actually read *Variety*, it should still provide plenty of fun for any who read and care about the weekly box-office reports.

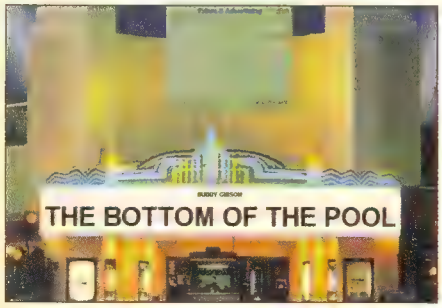
In the game, you're the head of a studio and it's up to you to develop, green-light, fund, and manage the talent of your burgeoning empire. It all starts with an idea, which becomes a script. When you think it's ready (you can go through various costly re-writes or shoot it as-is), you give the project a budget and hire the talent. Once the film is complete, ring it through some test screenings, choose the number of screens to open on, and watch the green pour in.

Or maybe not. It's easier to make quality films than ones that make a lot of money—in fact, there's little correlation between the two things in the game, much like real life. You can try to make a living on small-budget films that bring in a bit of cash, but experience a few duds and you'll be out of money—just like real life.

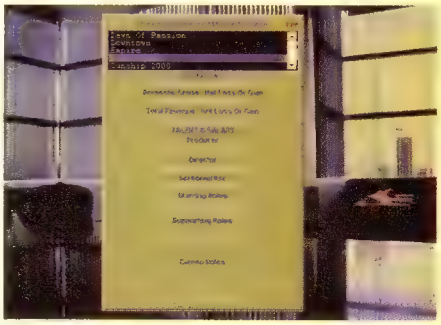
The only flaws with the program, and they're relatively minor, include a supremely clunky interface (it's not particularly fun to click 30 times to cast 15 extras for your film), a primitive visual look and a dearth of graphs and charts to track your projects. It also seems nearly impossible to create a non-action blockbuster, which is either an example of a lack of flexibility in the program or a Hollywood truth.

You can see this in the real world by looking at the panic surrounding the release of the mega-budgeted romance *Titanic* and the (relatively) weak showing of the "sure thing" action flick *Godzilla*. Trying to re-create these two event movies yields completely opposite results in *Hollywood Mogul*, but maybe that's the point. No one really knows how to create a blockbuster—take your pick whether a film executive or a programmer/designer knows the right formula.

Overall, *Hollywood Mogul* is a fabulously entertaining game. A bit more polish and they'll have themselves a blockbuster. Or maybe not. There aren't any sure things in software either. *–Steve Bauman*



Some of the movies generated by the program have rather silly names. Like this one



Nothing compares to the mighty "Field Trip," which managed to gross a mind-numbing $1.46 billion worldwide

★★★★☆

Hollywood Mogul

Hollywood Mogul Company • www.hollywood-mogul.com • Requirements: Windows, 486DX2/66 or higher, 16MB of RAM, 2X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: None

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Medieval

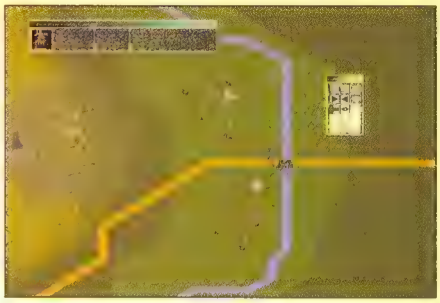
The 100 Years War on a budget

Incredible Simulations has designed games on the Alamo, the Little Bighorn, and on the Zulu Wars, so it shouldn't surprise anyone that their latest effort is a game of medieval battles. *Medieval* is a tactical battle simulator covering war in the middle ages (in this case, roughly from the beginning of the millennium to the end of the 15th century). Like other Incredible Simulations products, the graphics are passable but not remarkable, the sound effects range from adequate to atrocious, and the interface could use some work. These flaws, however, which are not unusual in a game from what amounts to a one man (Jeff Lapkoff) show, are balanced by a flexible, intuitive and relatively entertaining game design.

Wallace on the bridge... and the English are coming for him

Distributed by another niche wargaming company, HPS Simulations, *Medieval* comes on one CD, with all documentation stored therein, and includes a unit icon and scenario editor as well as the game itself. Play proceeds by turns, one side then another moving and fighting. There are no discrete movement or combat phases; rather, units can do what they like until they exhaust their movement allowance. Morale, training, weaponry, armor, and leadership are all accounted for, as are terrain effects on movement and combat. There is a good variety of weapons, armor, and unit types in the game, allowing for the simulation of most any medieval-era army. Ten ready-made battles are included, but budding kingmakers will want to explore the editors, which allow the creation of entirely new armies and maps.

Overall, the game is fairly successful as a medieval battle simulator. Its limitations—units can face only east or west, it's often hard to tell who is leading whom—are relatively minor, and the battles are fun to play. The computer can adopt one of three postures—aggressive, cautious, or balanced—and plays a decent game. Medieval lacks the splendor and visual appeal of, say, SPI's old *Agincourt* board game, but it's a good choice for anyone wanting to simulate medieval warfare on the PC. Come to think of it, it's the only choice. *–Robert Mayer*



Wallace's stats. Doesn't look a thing like Mel Gibson, does he?

[Medieval can be ordered from HPS by phone at 408-554-8381 or online at www.hpssims.com or directly from Incredible Simulations at P.O. Box 411237, Chicago, IL 60641-1237]

★★★½☆

Medieval
Incredible Simulations • www.incrediblesimulations.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 133MHz Pentium or higher, 16 MB RAM, CD-ROM • Mulitplayer: 2 players, PBEM, hotseat

Dragoon

The art of 18th Century warfare

Here's something different: a game that bucks every popular trend you can imagine in today's software market. A small publisher in an era of huge distribution conglomerates, putting out a wargame that not only doesn't come with four CDs of multimedia video clips, but is contained on floppy disks (remember those?). Further heresy, it doesn't cover The Battle of the Bulge, Waterloo or Gettysburg, but rather battles that even many *grognards* aren't familiar with, battles such as Hohenfriedberg and Mollwitz. Art of War Publishing's *Dragoon* covers the battles of Frederick the Great, and thus warfare in the mid 18th century.The art of war during Frederick the Great's era was one of maneuvering and formations, but even more than this, it was highly dependent upon leadership. All of this is captured in *Dragoon*, with the critical role of leaders particularly emphasized within the gaming system. A system with a strong board gaming feel, traditional "I go, you go" turn-based moves are replaced by a phase system that is based upon the leaders' command ratings. Essentially, every leader on the map is evaluated for their command rating and the highest rated leader moves first. A general with a low rating may not pass an initiative "roll" and thus his troops may not be able to move at all, sometimes for several turns. It can be realistically frustrating to watch a poor leader being completely outmaneuvered by a far superior general, resulting in the loss of a flank and perhaps the battle.*Dragoon* captures the ebb and flow of the mid-18th Century battlefield, with dramatic cavalry charges, formations moving to and firing from point blank range, leaders moving across the battlefield in order to control the most critical segments of a battle line, artillery barrages, routs and rallies. The scale is 150 yards per hex, fifteen minutes per turn, with battalion sized units. The graphics are pretty simple, which can make terrain discernment difficult at times. The AI is generally average to good, normally using the standard doctrines of the era. The interface is user-friendly, though a beginning player may find himself clicking on all his units to determine who can and cannot attack. Battles include Mollwitz, Hohenfriedberg, Kolin, and subsets of these, and provide a good feel for the period covered.

Frederick's right flank is contested in the Battle of Mollwitz

While it isn't in the same category as *The Operational Art of War*, *Dragoon* offers the *grognard* a chance to play an era not covered elsewhere. If you're a hardcore wargamer who complains that glitz and glitter has replaced substance in your hobby, give this one a shot. *–Jeff Lackey*

Dragoon is available directly from Art of War Publishing; they can be contacted via their web site (below) or by phone at 319.351.5396

★★★½☆

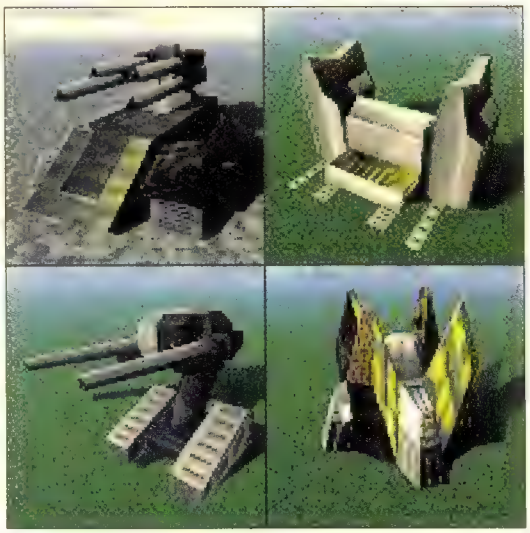
Dragoon: The Battles of Frederick the Great
Art of War Publishing • www.boku.simplenet.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 486DX2/66 or higher, 16 MB RAM • Multiplayer: 2 players, Hotseat

Total Annihilation: Battle Tactics

Cavedog throws us another meaty bone

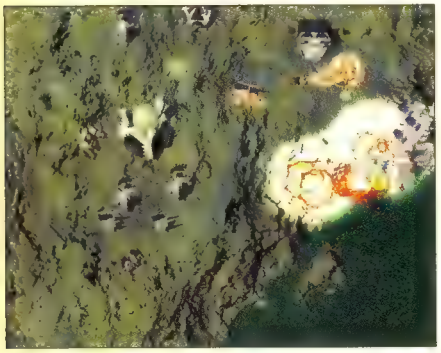
There is the possibility of too much of a good thing, but you sure wouldn't know it from the folks at Cavedog. The release of *Battle Tactics* now raises the *Total Annihilation* bean count to 245 units, 175 missions, and 90 multiplayer maps on 12 worlds.

This add-on is an interesting concept. Like a Marine drill instructor, *Battle Tactics* applies the KISS concept to gaming—Keep It Simple Stupid. Rather than offering more, it offers less (in a "more" kind of way). True, there are 100 new missions, but many are short—extremely short—less than ten minutes to be precise. There are longer missions, even *long* ones, but the emphasis is on missions that either teach a neophyte gamer how to play or that give veterans a quick real-time fix.



clockwise from top left: The Arm Phalanx, The Arm Stunner, The Core Copperhead, The Core Neutron

And *Battle Tactics* pulls it off quite well, thank you. There is an impressive grab bag of battles in this disc's code, from ultra short gee-I-got-ten-minutes-before-my-buddies-get-here skirmishes such as Can Rush, to all night slugfests like Hanan Base.



A battle bruise on the Crystal World

Somebody's having a bad day at Cavedog's World of Acid

The short engagements and some of the medium-length ones are playable in a lunch break, and most arer challenging and fun. Make no mistake, though; some hardcore *Total Annihilation* players may find the shorter fare somewhat simplistic. Nevertheless, the de-emphasis of the Construction K-Bots and the re-emphasis of the Fido's Gauss Rifle is refreshing. Better yet, you can play what you want, when you want. The new interface allows gamers to select any mission from the pack of 100 any time they please. No more wading through linear campaigns to reach a new and, hopefully, more interesting scenario.

Of course, the Fido isn't the only unit you'll use. While this isn't a *Core Contingeny—Part Deux,* Cavedog did throw us four bones: the long-range Arm Stunner, The Core Neutron (it fries folks while leaving structures in pristine condition), and an allotment of one mobile anti-air unit for each side.

The bottom line is another solid release for Cavedog. If you loved the original, but were weary of some of the epic struggles, this could be the add-on for you. *–Mark H. Walker*

★★★★☆

Total Annihilation: Battle Tactics
Cavedog Entertainment • www.cavedog.com • Requirements: Total Annihilation • Multiplayer: 2-10 players, Internet, LAN, modem, serial

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Extreme Tactics

"There is nothing new under the sun...."

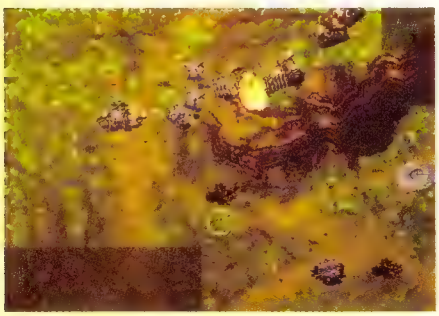
Exploration at the start of a game. Everything is a meeting engagement

Extreme Tactics is another of the *Command & Conquer* clones that has flooded the market recently. The plot line, resources, exploration, and victory conditions are all similar to other real-time strategy (RTS) games. Unfortunately, it does not have enough significant differences in its game system to set it apart from its more successful brethren. In some ways, it is not up to the levels set by *StarCraft*, *WarCraft II*, or *Command & Conquer*. The combat mechanics are also uninspiring. The structure building sequence is one-dimensional, and too forced. While *Extreme Tactics* does possess some interesting touches, these are not sufficient to set it apart from its numerous competitors. Those gamers looking for the next killer RTS game can go elsewhere.

Extreme Tactics does have an interesting design feature, which permits players to design their own specific vehicles based on tech level. Different chassis permit different weapons, sensors, shielding, and specialty mounts such as cloaking devices. Of course, certain propulsion methods don't work in certain terrain, and only the big, expensive platforms can carry the really fun weapons. Players can also change designs in the middle of a battle, and save the new design. Multiple versions of the same platform with different shields are very useful.

All structures in the game are mobile, but only have effect while stationary. This includes the player's all-important Mobile Command Center (MCC). This has the effect of making the game potentially fluid, but due to the one-dimensional nature of structure's effects, isn't as significant as it appears. Units cause damage to the terrain when they miss, which is common until they gain experience. It is also possible to set certain reactions for your units, such as moving to a destroyed enemy location and awaiting orders.

Extreme Tactics is an attempt to imbue the tried and true *C&C* model with some game play "hooks" to set itself apart from the pack. Unfortunately, these differences are not significant or well-crafted enough to accomplish this difficult feat in a very crowded field. *–Richard A. Lechowich*

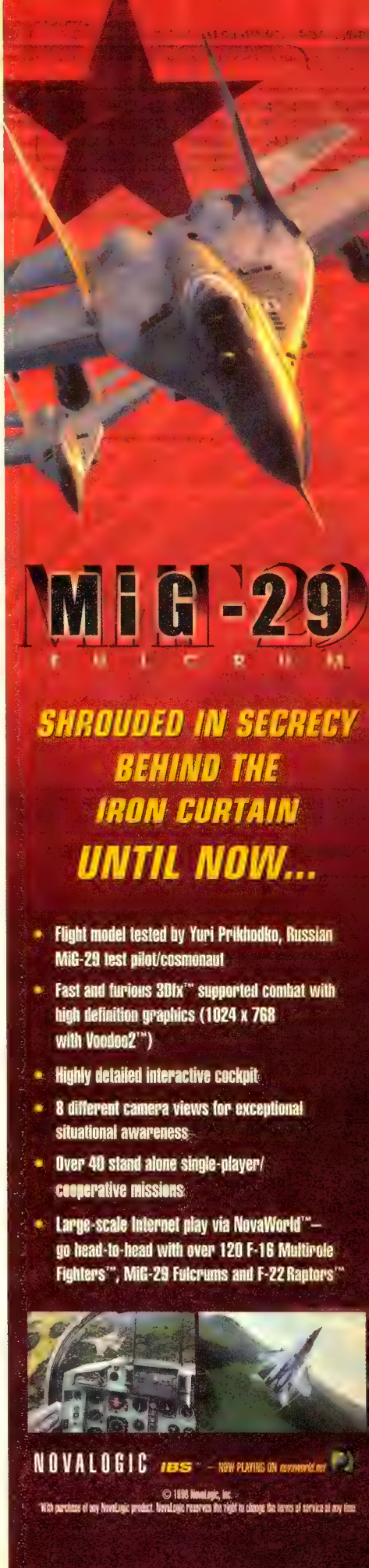


Look Out! We found them!

★★½☆☆

Extreme Tactics

Piranha Interactive Publishing, Inc. • www.piranhainteractive.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 90 MHz Pentium or higher, 16 MB RAM, 4X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2-4 players, Internet, LAN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Heart of Darkness

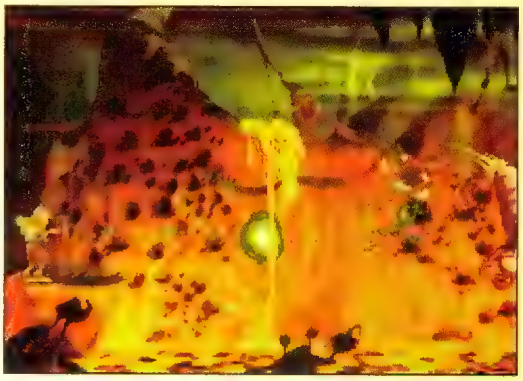
An old-school exercise in frustration

First demonstrated to the press over four years ago, *Heart of Darkness* had incredible cut scenes and music, charming character design (which even caught the eye of one Steven Spielberg) and simple gameplay. A 2D run-jump platform game in the classic style, it was developed by the folks responsible for *Out of This World* and *Flashback*, two of the finest examples of the genre (*Prince of Persia* remains the king). Zip ahead to the present and only the incredible score remains noteworthy; the rest of the world caught up with every other element of the game, making it feel more like a paean to the "good old days" of gaming than a modern product.

The cutscenes are impressive, and often merge seamlessly into the gameplay

The problem with *Heart of Darkness* is that its gameplay is locked in the model of *Out of this World*—enter a new location, die, complete a few screens, die, figure out the puzzle, die, go through the same screens again, die, *ad infinitum*. The game only saves at certain locations, so replaying the same few screens 20-30 times isn't out of the question. The game becomes an exercise in frustration rather than one that encourages exploration. You'll end up cursing the protagonist Andy's existence rather than get attached to the little guy.

Graphically the game looks like it was finished 3-4 years ago but never released. The 256 color low-resolution graphics are well drawn, with plenty of clever animation, but outdated in this age of hi-color, lens-flared 3D extravaganzas. You won't mind when playing—if anything, the modest system requirements are refreshing—but the game's biggest problem occurs when you finish it. You'll probably say, "That's it?" A good player can finish the game in about six hours, while the merely competent can complete it in around 10. That's not a lot of gameplay for your gaming dollar.



Shoot the weevil-thing, climb the wall, repeat

A game like *Oddworld*, despite its equally evil saved game system, still managed to imbue the 2D platform genre with enough new elements to make it feel fresh. *Heart of Darkness*, with its early 90's gameplay, is little more than a curiosity. Get it for the kiddies who use the old machine in the rumpus room and it'll keep them quiet for a few hours. At least until they see you playing *Unreal*. *–Steve Bauman*

★★½☆☆

Heart of Darkness

Tantrum • www.interplay.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 486DX2/66 or higher, 16MB of RAM, 2X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: None

Beast Wars: Transformers

Entry-level robotic mayhem for the kiddies

Enter the *Unreal* killer! (Perhaps a slight fib.) *Beast Wars: Transformers* is a 3D third-person perspective action shooter that succeeds in capturing the essentials of the *Transformers* toy franchise. Here's a newsflash though: in case the title and the "E-everyone" rating fail to subtly ingrain it into your gray matter, *Beast Wars* is a game meant for younger gamers.

As such, the game is quite successful. 10 of the Transformer characters are at your disposal throughout 24 levels, 12 levels to each side's campaign. The opposing factions of Predacons and Maximals are faithfully represented by such cultured diplomats as Optimus Primal, Rhinox, and Megatron. The polygon characters transform as they should, though those looking to track proper physical placement of poly faces during these metamorphoses will be disappointed. The animal forms of the Transformers have no function other than to shield the player from the tremendous radioactivity of their environment. Agility is increased, but the lack of any physical attacks in these forms will surely be a point latched on to by Hasbro'lings as easily as it is by us fully grown children.

Megatron in T-Rex form deep within the urban zone

The environments in which the adventure takes place are adorned with a predictable assortment of popcorn turrets, snake dispensers, and guard bots, console elements as fitting as any other aspect of the game. Rarely does the terrain look as impressive as similar fare from the king lummoxes of the industry—that is, when the jittery engine doesn't forget to texture some distant polygons, or when those same faces don't shift and contort underfoot.

This game is also not the champion of interactivity: basic movement controls and a shoot button. That is all, spelunker. You possess the weapon of your robot and essentially nothing else, each 'bot having only a unique (albeit entertaining) iteration of the same blaster and missile device.

Air Razor attempts a rescue of a buddy captured by the Predacons

All-in-all, *Beast Wars* is a good game for less experienced adrenal enthusiasts, but one has to wonder if children will actually want to play this entry when more advanced "adult" bloodbaths beckon. *–Scott Hunter*

★★½☆☆

Beast Wars Transformers

Hasbro Interactive • www.hasbro-interactive.com • www.beastwars.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 98, 100MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB of RAM, 4X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2-4 players, Internet, LAN, modem

Motocross Madness

More fun than a painful groin injury

Dat's gotta hurt

When the most serious critique of a game is that the screen font used on the menus is a bit fuzzy, you know you have a special game. *Motocross Madness* is as perfect a gaming experience as has been released all year. It has the ease of play of an arcade game and the physics and depth of play of a simulation, wrapped in one of the most aesthetically appealing packages ever seen.

The game is incredibly feature-rich, with multiple race styles ranging from stunt quarries to free-for-all Baja races and an editor that allows you to create your own stadium tracks. All of the pre-made tracks are superb, with innumerable opportunities for getting seriously airborne. You can race up to 10 computer AI opponents that are incredibly good at what they do—they also screw up from time to time, which adds to the realism. You can also race over the Internet.

The Baja races rule the known universe

While the game works beautifully with a gamepad (surprise) or an analog joystick, it's a transcendent experience with Microsoft's SideWinder Freestyle Pro, a motion-sensing gamepad that allows you to lean through the turns and rock forward and back in mid-air.

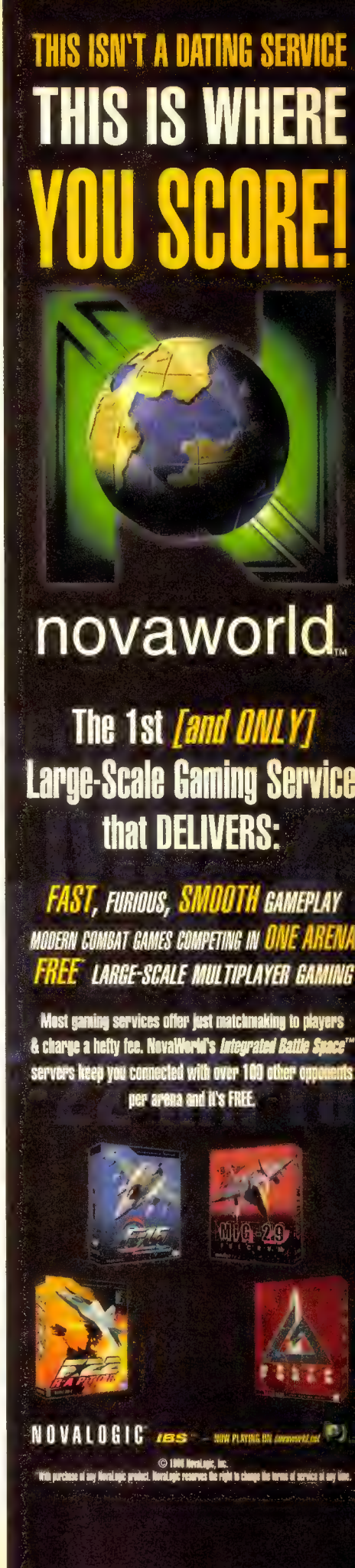
Visually, the game is peerless. The rolling terrain looks less like the usual square-ish polygons than a smoothed out version of NovaLogic's Voxel terrains. It's only flaw, a lack of objects like trees, is completely irrelevant when you're ripping across the landscape at 100+ MPH—the sensation of speed is superb. Of course a high-end PC with a fast 3D card will allow you to appreciate it in all of its glory, but the number of opponents seems to affect the engine speed more than its overall detail.

As you soar across the sky and land on the ground with a mighty thud, you'll feel the rider's pain in various parts of your anatomy. Despite the possibility of personal injury, *Motocross Madness* is the most entertaining game in ages, a nearly perfect combination of superb gameplay, gravity defying physics and stunning graphics. It'll be the most pleasurable groin injury you'll ever experience. *–Steve Bauman*

★★★★★

Motocross Madness

Microsoft • www.microsoft.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 98, 133MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB of RAM, 4X CD-ROM, 3D Accelerator • Multiplayer: 2-8 players, Internet, LAN, serial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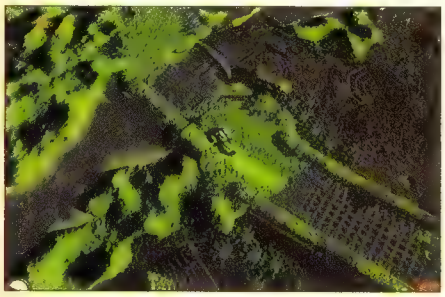
Vangers

Only the fanatically dedicated need apply

Weird, weird, weird. And unfortunately infuriating. *Vangers* is a top-down perspective adventure action game that may have you reminiscing about another sci-fi game called *Starflight*... assuming you can figure it out. You don't really play *Vangers*, you decipher it.

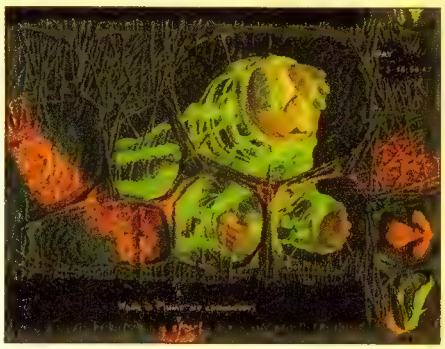
In general you must drive your Mechos (i.e. car) about and through the realms, fulfilling quests essentially in the name of curiosity; the more successful you are the more you discover about the world(s) in which you live. Specifically, you play a Lostie struggling within the World Chain to gain Dominance and knowledge under the concerned cynical eyes of your paternal wardens, the Eleepods. And so out you go racing in a Mecho, a Vanger warrior shuttling precious Phlegma, Nymbos, and Cirt from one forsaken corner of the realm to the next while gunning down the competition.



The brightest of all the cult cycles

Confused now? This strange presentation is an attempt to immerse the player fully into a different world, with different terms and customs that must be fathomed if the game is to be understood; however, this immersion approach is too much. Merely communicating with an Eleepod counselor is an exercise in deduction and literary interpretation, pseudo-mystic abstractions occurring everywhere in place of normal explanations. On its own it may be fine, but nothing in *Vangers* is ever communicated/made clear to you in simple straightforward user-friendly terms: you lose patience with this "absolute" approach fast.

The developers have labored hard to deliver an open-ended, biologically themed car-gunning all-enthralling alien adventure that allows players considerable latitude and tremendous exploratory discretion, but it is this effort that makes the game such a mind-boggling chore. It ends up being very difficult to deduce what is going on, what you are doing, and what needs to be done, never mind the challenge of the actual doing itself: the gameplay is a constant struggle of the undesirable kind.



Too bad it didn't ship with a decoder ring and gps gear

You really want to get lost within its bowels because there is clearly a fun experience residing there, but the execution ultimately wards off such an inclination. *Vangers* is too much work and aspirin. *–Scott Hunter*

★★½☆☆

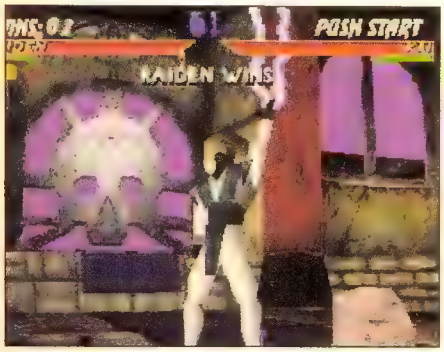
Vangers

Interactive Magic • www.imagicgames.com • Requirements: Windows 95, NT 4.0, 133MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB of RAM, 4X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2-8 players, Internet, LAN, modem

Mortal Kombat 4

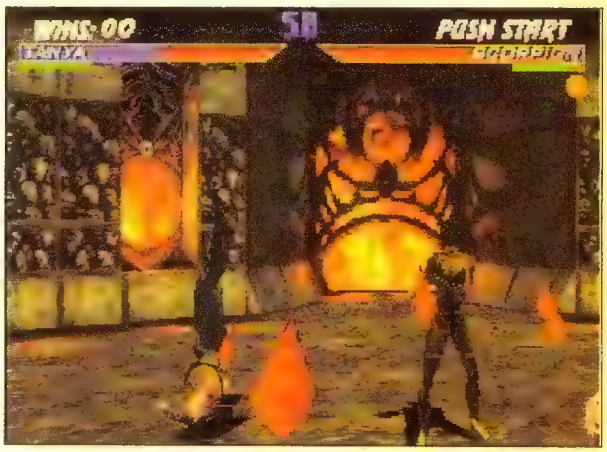
More anti-Kongressional karnage

Remember when the original *Mortal Kombat* appeared? It stoked so much controversy and gained so much popularity that Midway has been riding its bloody wave ever since, despite the fact it was a pretty lousy game. In comparison to the competition, especially the various *Street Fighter* knock-offs, the *Kombat* games lacked polish and finesse, and seemed coarse in the face of truly refined fighting games. And when you get right down to it, not much has changed.



Raiden triumphs again. And joy and love can once more reign supreme

Mortal Kombat 4 brings the series into the realm of 3D and does so with some degree of style—it shows off all the good things about this series, namely the atmosphere, storyline, sharp character graphics and yes, gore. The game uses both 3Dfx and Direct 3D acceleration, and is impressive looking—better on the whole than the Nintendo 64 version. Unfortunately, the visuals are marred in part by sub-par animation and graphic glitches (disappearing body parts, blocky shadows, clipping, and, on the test machine, the characters would actually disappear for a second when bringing out their weapons). On the other hand, the game runs incredibly fast on a 200MHz machine with an original 3Dfx Voodoo card, the characters are well-rendered and the backgrounds all have a great sense of dark atmosphere to them. Sound effects are well done and the soundtrack fits the game's theme. However, as of this writing, the game hates PCI sound cards—a patch is promised.



It's not just any woman who can make a ninja stand on his head like that...

With responsive controls and interesting characters, this is an excellent conversion of a decent, gore-filled fighter. But for all its 3D polygonal grandeur this is still *Mortal Kombat*, and while you can't say the game isn't fun, it still lacks the depth of its competition. *–Jason D'Aprile*

★★★☆☆

Mortal Kombat 4

Midway • www.midway.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 133MHz Pentium or higher, 24MB of RAM, 4X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2 players, same machine

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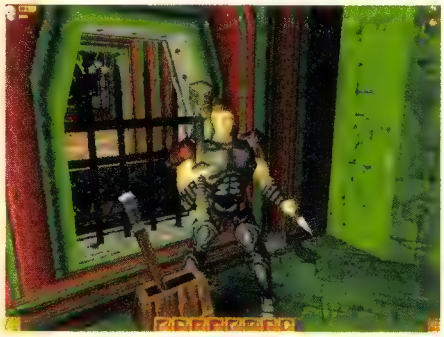
Deathtrap Dungeon

If you can't see it, how can you kill it?

Deathtrap Dungeon is a bloody, dismemberment-laden third-person dungeon romp with enough T&A to hold a whole pack of prepubescent boys at bay for the duration—it's enough to make Lara Croft blush. While it's definitely no *Tomb Raider*, it has a number of things in its favor.

Pick either the brawny barbarian Chaindog or the buxom and trampy Red Lotus, whose naively doe-eyed face and leather-clad body suggest the ultimate submissive-aggressive wet dream, and traverse the dangers of a treasure-filled dungeon lair. There are 13 weapons, ranging from magical swords to a flamethrower, blunderbuss, an archaic rocket launcher, warhammers and even small bombs. Additionally, there are magical scrolls, potions and even "warpigs" that, once let loose, run around wildly until they blow up.



GQ Man of the Year? It's Chaindog, up close and personal

The monsters run through the standard fantasy baddies list: ax-wielding zombies, death knights, grim reapers and the game's contribution to the "Red-headed Evil Stepdaughters" club—an extremely limber sword wielding femme with a distinct dislike for excess clothing. The monster AI is virtually non-existent, but what the game lacks in smarts it makes up for with sheer numbers. Adding to the ambulatory hazards are the eponymous deathtraps of the title—floors collapse, walls open up to reveal flaming spouts, spiked pits are all over, walls move to push you downwards and monsters tend to respawn in the worst spots.

On the downside, you can only save in certain places, and to do so the game forces you to witness an absurd decapitation scene. The game's controls are terribly unresponsive with a control pad, to the point where you have to use the keyboard. Even worse are the absolutely hideous camera angles—not only does the game seem to have a knack for choosing the worst possible view of any given situation, you can't adjust it. In a place where every step can mean grizzly death, this is a major oversight.

Red Lotus, not the type of girl to get hysterical over a few bugs

Deathtrap Dungeon is a challenging and violent game with enough entertainment and mayhem to make it somewhat worthy of recommendation; however, the lousy save game function, poor controls and unworkable camera angles really bring it down. It's not horrible and can be entertaining, but it's still no competition for Lara. *–Jason D'Aprile*

★★½☆☆

Deathtrap Dungeon

Eidos Interactive • www.eidos.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 133MHz Pentium or higher, 16 MB RAM, 4X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2-8 players, LAN

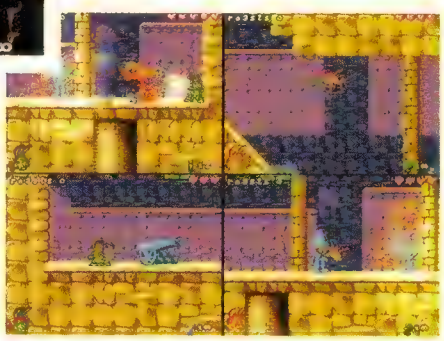
Jazz Jackrabbit 2

Well executed, but generally more of the same

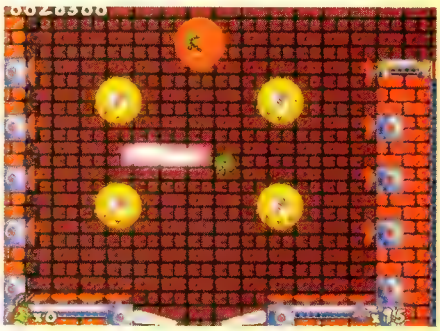
Spazz catches some air

Jazz Jackrabbit 2 is a curious launch product for the heavily-hyped *über* publisher Gathering of Developers. Perhaps it's a shrewd move—rather than launch with a high-profile title that's trying to compete in established genres, go out there with a small title with a small but loyal fan base. The game itself is actually pretty good, a well-executed but ultimately semi-hyperactive version of Sega's *Sonic* series, with better graphics and a an even greater feeling of more-of-the-same.

A truly guilty pleasure, *Jazz 2* has an incredibly rich feature set for a game that costs less than $30. It's a typical side-scrolling run-and-jump platform title, featuring two characters, each with its own moves. The game delivers four full episodes, each with multiple levels, plus a level editor and fairly low-lag Internet play (a first for the genre). The included levels are quite varied and the editor, a complex affair that's not for the timid, should allow an eternal assortment of user created levels.



There are four player split-screen modes for both of the people who have that many controllers hooked up to their PC



Jazz pinball (cross-promotion alert)

The game operates at a frenetic pace, which should appeal to the youngsters who are obviously the game's target market. The graphics are extremely colorful, the controls responsive and the machine requirements modest, making it one of those optimum games for a hand-me-down PC.

If you've never owned a console system or aren't already sick of the genre, *Jazz 2* is as good a sampling of the genre as exists today on the PC. While it doesn't try to innovate like *Oddworld*, it can win you over with its unpretentious charms. *–Steve Bauman*

★★★½☆

Jazz Jackrabbit 2

Epic MegaGames • www.jazzjackrabbit.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 90MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB of RAM, 2X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2-32 players, Internet, same machine

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Jetfighter: Full Burn

Fighting among the fjords in the F-22

Jetfighter: Full Burn is a continuation of the successful *Jetfighter* series. Although it includes Freeflight and Single Mission options, it is meant to be played in the campaign mode. Set in 2006, a secessionist Russian government has attacked Norway to obtain oil and other natural resources. The player can fly either the Russian side in a MiG-42 or as the U.S. in a F/A-18 or F-22N. You take on the role of Lt. Col. Alexiei Sokolov or Lt. Tom Jenkins and maneuver within your base complex, gathering information on the story line. As the campaign progresses, the missions become more difficult. For those air warriors looking for a pseudo-role playing game like *Wing Commander* without the science fiction overtones, *Jetfighter: Full Burn* is for you.

The game's flyable aircraft are strictly limited to the F/A-18, F-22N, and MiG-42. Weapons loadouts are also limited to specific types, such as "Air-to-Air Clean"—you cannot mix and match weapons on hard points. This is occasionally irritating—when you don't want to take the two or four MK-82s, you can't swap them out for more Mavericks. Finding the enemy and navigating are all relatively uncomplicated affairs. When the distance is long, and no threats exist, the time-compression feature greatly speeds play.

Based on conversations with carrier pilots, the mechanics of fight and combat are solid, and reflect actual practice on ship. There are minor variations, such as in grading carrier landings, but overall, the "feel" is good. Combat is stressful, demanding, and difficult. The plane's radar provides an accurate picture of the threats, so situational awareness is very high. Getting a radar or heat-seeking lock on the enemy is usually not too difficult, but obtaining a hit through the blizzard of effective countermeasures is. Dogfighting or conducting ground strikes without using the built-in cheat functions can be very difficult. The tension of making a night carrier landing in a rough sea is definitely present.

A cannon shot—you must be within one nautical mile or closer to use the cannon, but ranges of a quarter to half a mile are much more likely to result in a hit

There are four different computer keyboard combinations to know, but the most common ones can be memorized fairly quickly. Some minor annoyances are present in aircraft control placement on the keyboard; some important functions are widely separated. Also, you often have to use the <CTRL> and <ALT> keys to obtain different aircraft functions, but if you hit the Windows key between them by accident, the game will exit and crash.

There are several graphics levels to choose from, and the game looks its best on the highest setting. The map of Norway is fixed, and players cannot move outside its boundaries. The considerable challenge is to maneuver among the bays and mountains during combat without creating an "earthmoving" experience. The adjustable settings for joystick controls and other variables are simple and fairly easy to manipulate, but the stick feels too responsive on its highest setting. The sound chatter provided by your wingman and other friendly aircraft provides valuable information and clues to necessary actions. For example, do not fly in front of your wingman when he calls "Fox Two" or his Sidewinder will take you down. Missiles also have nice sound and visual effects when they come off the rail. The smoke trails are useful in combat, allowing you to spot the enemy and possibly determine their location.

Carrier Operations - the heart of U.S. airpower in the campaign

A Russian MiG-42 takes off from the Mobile Base complex. Landings are much simpler here than on a U.S. carrier

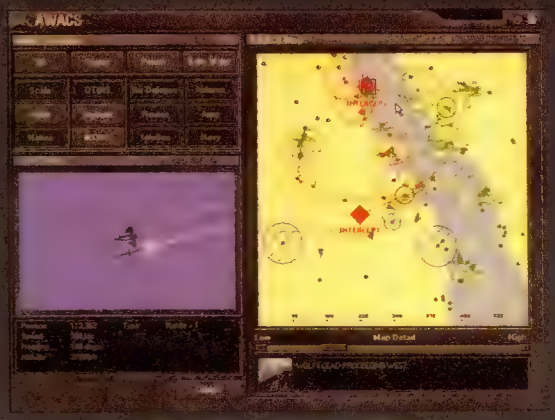
Jetfighter: Full Burn provides an interesting look into present day aerial combat. The campaign feature is a nice addition, but the game is playable without the added cut scenes and maneuvering through the base. Modern day jet jockeys looking for a campaign experience that will stress the better virtual pilot will enjoy the game. Those hoping for *Falcon 4.0*, or any similar larger-scale detailed flight simulator, should look elsewhere. *–Richard A. Lechowich*

A naval strike with Mavericks against a cargo ship. For a supposedly "smart weapon," this is much more difficult than it looks

★★★☆☆

Jetfighter: Full Burn

Mission Studios • www.missionstudios.com • Requirements: DOS, 133 MHz Pentium or higher, 16 MB RAM, 4X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2-8 players, LAN, modem



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ocean

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Baseball 3D

The Big M goes down swinging

Coming up on our feature presentation: Junior and A-Rod journey to Cleveland to battle a sinister split-fingered starter in Enter the Nagy

The humorlessly titled *Baseball 3D: 1998 Edition* embodies, in one not-so-convenient package, all the criticisms (fair or not) that have been leveled at Microsoft's operating systems and Office software: excessive system requirements, numerous strange design decisions and inexplicable glitches in the interface and execution. In other words, this arcade sports title has performed an illegal operation and… oh, never mind.

Baseball 3D's gameplay is a disjointed, frustrating experience. Although the basic ball physics are generally good, batting is either too easy or too hard depending on difficulty setting, fielders have cannon arms and the computer-assisted fielding is either absent or total—the computer either handles *all* catching and throwing duties or leaves you to fumble with the controls. This is extremely bad, considering that ground balls sail through the infield at warp speed, the available fielding camera angles are terrible and the computer-controlled throwing is much too conservative, often conceding bases to runners that could be thrown out.

The computer manager is the AI equivalent of Morris Buttermaker, making all sorts of pointless substitutions while happily allowing its pitchers to give up double digits in hits and runs. Baserunners neglect to run with two outs and almost always succeed in getting doubled off on snared line drives. There are intermittent problems with in-game scoring of earned and unearned runs, and simulated statistics demonstrate consistent flaws.

Despite all these shortcomings, *Baseball 3D*'s most confusing problems lie in its numerous design-level oversights. Why do instant replays of the previous play occur after the next batter has been announced and has stepped into the box? Why do you have to drop out of the game and endure the load times to view the box score? Why do the overlays show players' 1997 stats rather than those of the current game and season as they come to the plate? Why wasn't multiplayer capability included? (A patch delivering Internet play has been promised, but not delivered, as of this writing.) Why does Terry McDonalds' play-by-play sound… like… the… electronic… voice… on… an… answering machine?

And the world may never know the answers to these questions. Make no mistake about it, *Baseball 3D* is the current eye-candy king, but anyone wanting a balanced, smooth-playing, immersive arcade baseball game should test the market for better offers. *–Geoff Stratton*

★★☆☆☆

Microsoft Baseball 3D

Microsoft • www.microsoft.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 90MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB of RAM, 4X CD-ROM, 3D Accelerator • Multiplayer: 2 players, same machine

Fox Sports Soccer '99

And you thought the U.S. World Cup team was bad…

Sometimes you just have to wonder what software companies are thinking when they release a game. *Fox Sports Soccer '99* is case in point—there are numerous soccer games already on the market, and almost all of them are significantly better than this one. If that doesn't tell you everything you need to know about this program, read on for the gory details.

A lack of player control makes defending a corner kick an iffy proposition

The game utilizes 3D accelerator cards, but the graphics and animation are merely average, making them significantly worse than those in EA Sports' *World Cup 98*. On the positive side, a good selection of game modes is available, including national and international league and tournament play. Don't go looking for Ronaldo or Shearer—all players are fictional and no player editor is included.

Only four gamepad buttons are used, making the control insufficient for any type of strategic gameplay. Passing is abysmal—you can't see enough of the field to set up plays and even if you could, your teammates' computer AI doesn't appear to know how to do much more than run up and down the field. Offsides is rarely called, even when players are clearly in violation. A player can only shoot in the direction he is running, and the shot is accomplished by holding the button down while a "power bar" builds strength. If it sounds a bit awkward, it's even worse in actual gameplay.

On the other side of the ball, playing defense is a matter of running close to the ball carrier—that's how you take the ball away. You also have no choice of which player is controlled—the computer makes that choice for you. Half-time stats? Nonexistent.

On the pitch, the game is reminiscent of a peewee soccer game with the five year old kids all overloaded on caffeine. The player with the ball runs as hard as he can straight to the goal until someone bumps into him and takes the ball away, then everyone runs the opposite direction and an occasional goal is scored. Any similarity to the sport seen during the World Cup tournament in France is purely coincidental.

In all fairness, the game installs with no problems and uninstalls equally well. However, if you're interested in anything between those two activities, and in particular you'd like a game that resembles soccer, go buy *World Cup 98*. *–Jeff Lackey*

★½☆☆☆

Fox Sports Soccer '99

Fox Sports Interactive • www.foxsportsgames.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 120MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB of RAM, 4X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2- 8 players, Internet, LAN, modem

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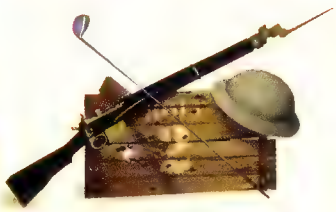


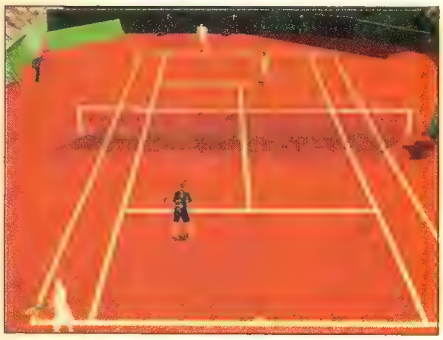
ACCESS SOFTWARE INCORPORATED

www.AccessSoftware.com

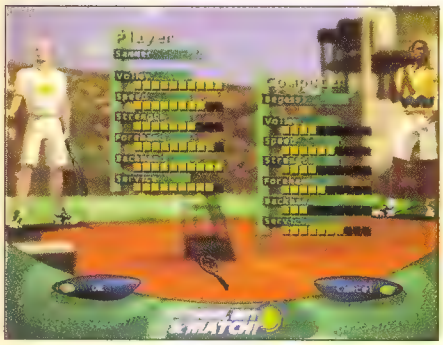
Game, Net & Match

Blue Byte's tennis game trips up at the net

The appeal of computer tennis is deeply rooted in the original videogame. Not *Doom*, you silly youngster, but *Pong*. BlueByte has brought the sport into the 90s, adding 3D accelerated graphics and Internet play, but the basics of the computerized game haven't changed—move from side to side hitting a little square object. All that's missing is the burned-in image on your TV and the constant "blip, blip, blip."



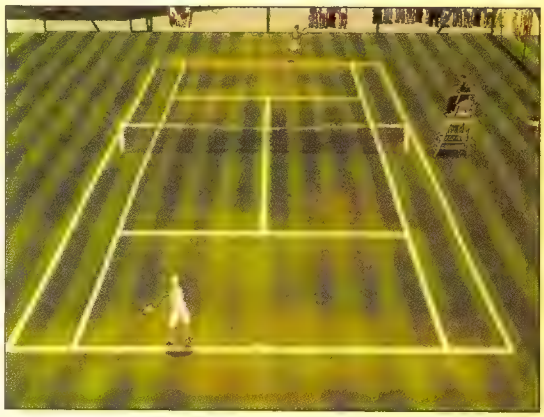
Unfortunately, in doubles you can't hit your teammate in the ass with the ball



Not to be confused with Sampras vs. Agassi

Unfortunately, playing *Game, Net & Match* against the computer is about as challenging as *Pong*. After a couple of matches, you'll probably find the game challenging. Around the third match, it's game over—you'll learn to charge the net on every play, generating angled shots the computer can't return. Players covers too much of the court, making passing shots all but impossible. There's no fatigue, so it's not uncommon to see a computer player dive on consecutive shots without as much as a penalty.

While the game is full-featured, with single matches, tournaments, seasons and a practice mode, each game feels identical to the last, regardless of the opponent. Playing through an entire season and moving your player up in the world tennis rankings should be an exciting experience, but each game is so dull that you'll dread the next tournament. The play-by-play commentary is at-best non-existent and repetitive and at-worst not even remotely representative of the on-screen action. The saving grace of the game is its Internet play, but while it works perfectly, the ability to cover too much of the court eliminates most of the strategies of tennis.



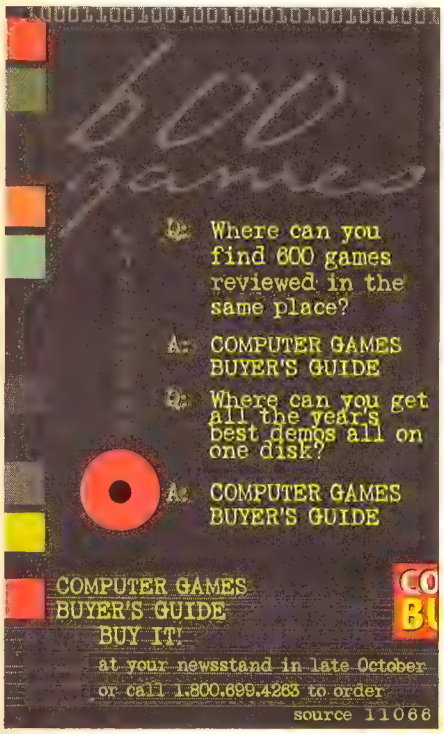
The court and player graphics are pretty good throughout

All of these problems conflict with the basic appeal of the real-world game, leaving *Game, Net & Match* as a moderately entertaining title in extremely short bursts. Unfortunately for tennis fans, there's little in the way of alternatives—aside from the European import *Tennis Elbow* (good luck finding it in the US), *Game, Net & Match* is the only game in town. *–Steve Bauman*

★★☆☆☆

Game, Net & Match

Blue Byte Software • www.bluebyte.com • Requirements: Windows 95, 133MHz Pentium or higher, 16MB of RAM, 4X CD-ROM • Multiplayer: 2-4 players, Internet, LAN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milia games

February 9-12

There's this guy going around at parties who used to be just an underling at some game developing company and he brags all evening about going to the French Riviera on business and that, thanks to a stand he had at this trade show in Cannes, he met an interactive media publisher, sold him a game concept, and now has his own company supposedly with offices all over the world.

games-games-games-

Ultracorps

Turn-based strategy gaming on a galactic scale

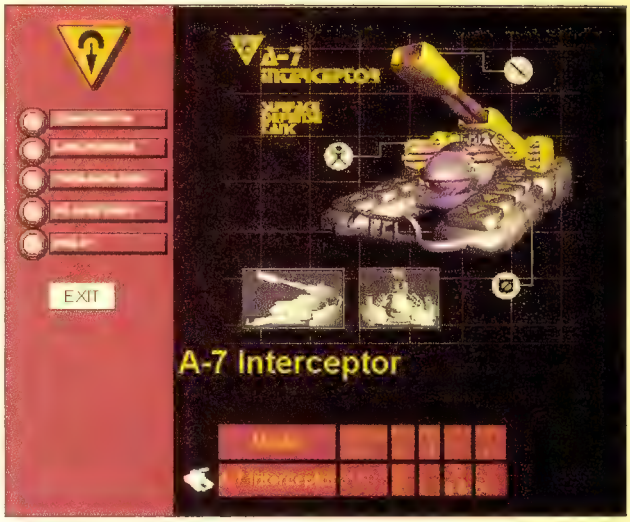
This summer has not been a particularly good one for fans of turn-based strategy games. The cancellation of *Guardians: Agents of Justice*, the transformation of the *X-COM* franchise into space combat and first-person shooter games, and the continuing glut of real-time strategy titles (some quite good) have all left dedicated turn-based fans wondering if their favorite genre is nearing extinction.

One company daring to buck this trend is VR-1, which has just released *Ultracorps* on Microsoft's Internet Gaming Zone (www.zone.com). This browser-based game attempts to recreate the grand scale of classic space opera games like *Master of Orion* or *Reach for the Stars* while incorporating the added complexities of a massively multiplayer gaming environment in which literally thousands of other players compete for the same real estate. By and large, it succeeds at its lofty goals.

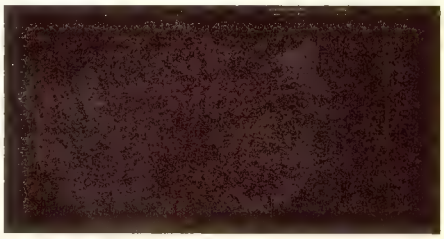
Ultracorps is presently a premium Zone game, meaning that a paid subscription of either $9.95 for one month or $19.95 for three months is required to play. After subscribing, would-be galactic emperors can join any existing universe(s) or, more prudently, wait for a new one to begin. Currently, games lasting for 30 or 60 turns seem to be the rule, with turns being run either once or twice a day and new universes opening about once a week.

Once a universe is selected, the player must pick one of fourteen possible races. These races differ from one another only in their starting fleet composition and homeworld characteristics, one of *Ultracorps'* weaker features. While the initial fleets incorporate various important tradeoffs between speed, firepower, and versatility, no race-specific units or special abilities exist in this game. As a result, after only a few turns racial flavor is totally lost as players construct whatever units their situation dictates.

A dynamic economic model lies at the very heart of *Ultracorps*, and the quirks of its operation provide considerable intrigue. Each of the more than sixty units is given a numerical rating in categories like hit probability, number of attacks, speed, and cargo capacity. While these numbers are invariable, a unit's price fluctuates each turn based on how many were produced by gamers throughout the galaxy. An A-7 Interceptor that is horribly overpriced during the game's initial turns might be an incredible bargain a few turns later. This variability encourages the construction of a wide variety of units and can give astute players a real feeling of accomplishment when they lock in a major production order at a ridiculously low price.



An A-7 Interceptor



The Generation 10 Ultracorps Universe

Once they roll off the assembly line, newly built units either join the defensive home fleet of the world that produced them or are shipped off to fight and die in some distant star system. Gamers who expect animated 3-D combat, stereo sound and lens flares will be disappointed by *Ultracorps*, whose battles are rather abstract. Whenever fleets belonging to different players end their movement in the same star system or over a neutral planet, a fight ensues. Its outcome is completely in the hands of the server, which analyzes each unit's combat capabilities and generates a round-by-round display that shows which units were destroyed on either side. This continues until only one player has units remaining, at which time the battle ends and the world comes under the survivor's control. Various player-written battle simulators that give good approximations of *Ultracorps* combat can already be found on the net and provide an excellent tool for neophyte commanders inexperienced at judging relative fleet strengths.

Diplomacy is an area in which this game truly shines. When even the smallest of empires is likely to have six or more potentially hostile neighbors salivating over the same shrinking pool of nearby neutral planets, adroit negotiation becomes as important as fleet construction. Real-time discussion is possible in Zone chat rooms, but in practice most diplomacy is carried out via Ultramail, the in-game email system. Players divvy up neutral planets, establish lasting borders, trade insults and shameless flattery, and form secret alliances to crush their unsuspecting opponents in a fashion that would bewilder the most astute of Italian Renaissance politicos.

In short, *Ultracorps* is a game designed for hard-core gamers who are more interested in substance than style. Its lack of cutting edge visuals and sound, turn-based format and emphasis on diplomacy and economics rather than non-stop action clearly target an audience that has lately been feeling rather neglected. Players who fit its profile will find the game an addictive and rewarding experience. *–Dave Markell*

A hotly contested border zone

Dead2fast> ok ;) Still chance then....
randyofstr0> hi
TCA_Moonbars> Ah!
TCA_Moonbars> 8 of my enemies TK bikes destroyed.
TCA_Moonbars> he only had 10
TCA_Moonbars> What a lucky break
BendingPine> This was the last tick. Right?
TCA_wormy100> im here to play the game
[Type here to talk to others in the room]

The Opening Chatroom

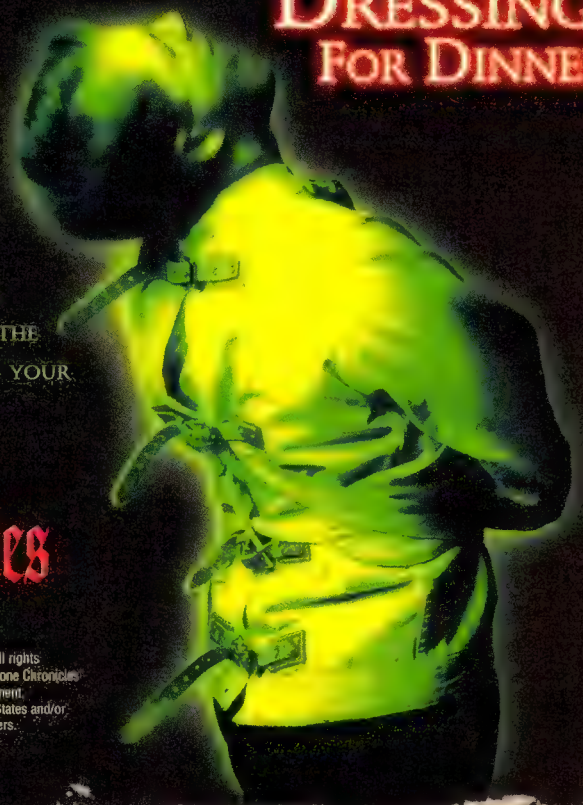
★★★★☆

Ultracorps

Microsoft • www.zone.com • Requirements: Windows 95, NT 4.0, 75MHz Pentium or higher, 8MB of RAM, Internet access • Multiplayer: Massively multiplayer via Internet

Welcome To Blackstone Asylum

Will You Be Dressing For Dinner?



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ACTUAL GAME SCREENS

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DWANGO

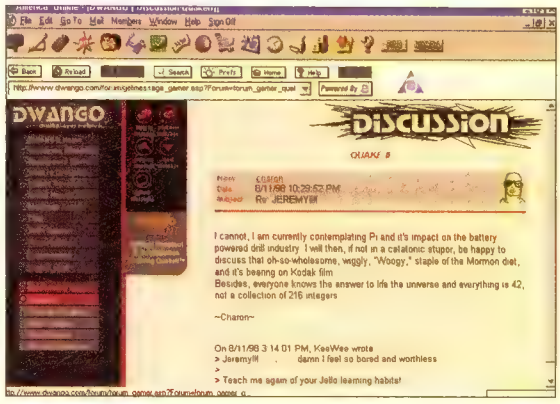
Well, they built it. So where is everybody?

You've been stalking your prey for what seems like forever, but now, finally, you've got him dead to rights. He's facing away from you, blissfully unaware of his own impending demise. You break from cover and begin to close the distance—best to shoot from point-black range, just to make sure—but wait! The screen is flickering and stuttering; your system is freezing up; control has been compromised. You lose only seconds, but those precious seconds are more than enough. By the time this particular speed-bump in the information superhighway has been crossed, your target has slipped out of your sights, doubled back, and dispatched you from behind.

Another great deathmatch ruined by Internet latency.

DWANGO believes they have the solution. DWANGO (Dial-up Wide Area Network Game Operation) is an on-line gaming service that uses its own servers, located in major cities around the world—Chicago, Singapore, Boston, Seoul, Dallas, Tokyo, New York, Atlanta, and over twenty others—to offer gamers a low-ping alternative to the Internet. Since you dial directly in to their server, there are no lags or stutters in gameplay. In fact, deathmatching on DWANGO is as smooth and fluid as LAN or modem-to-modem fragging, if not more so. On-line gamers, rejoice—the playing field is now level!

I see your gun is as big as mine


DWANGO
DISCUSSION
QUAKE II
I cannot, I am currently contemplating Pi and it's impact on the battery powered drill industry. I will then, if not in a catatonic stupor, be happy to discuss that oh-so-wholesome, wiggly, "Woogy," staple of the Mormon diet, and it's bearing on Kodak film
Besides, everyone knows the answer to life the universe and everything is 42, not a collection of 216 integers
~Charon~
On 8/11/98 3:14:01 PM, KeeWee wrote
> Jeremy!!! damn I feel so bored and worthless
> Teach me sgam of your Jello learning habits!

Three people in the chat room! Our cup runneth over

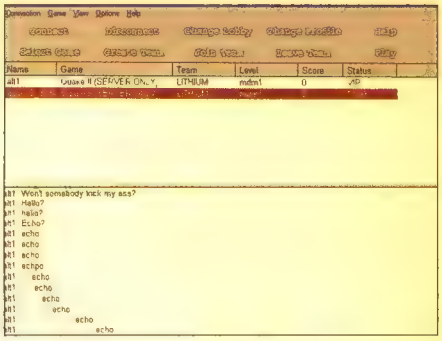
And the cost, after your free first hour, is $7.95 for five hours or a monthly flat rate of $34.96—only mildly outrageous. The game selection reveals a focus on twitch-oriented fragfests, the better to take advantage of the fabulously low latency (average response time: under 150 milliseconds). There's *Quake II, Hexen, Final Ultimate Doom II 95, Heretic,* and *Blood,* as well as *Big Red Racing, Hellbender* and (through Microsoft's Internet Gaming Zone) *CART Precision Racing, Monster Truck Madness* and *Age of Empires.* (*Total Annihilation* is, at least in theory, coming soon.)

DWANGO also offers a free on-site chat function and sponsors a *Quake II* tournament every Saturday evening; beginners are welcome. (How's a fragmaster supposed to feel good about himself if he doesn't utterly decimate a beginner at least once a week?) But DWANGO's best traits are undeniably its remarkable speed, fluidity and surefootedness. Even an aging 166MHz Pentium with a 28.8 connection delivers a *Quake II* experience faster than Flo Jo and smoother than quicksilver; on a 350MHz Pentium II with a 56K modem, the experience is pure ambrosia.

So what could possibly go wrong?

Well … two things. First, there's an alarming lack of warm bodies in the lobby. Rustling up a game, in fact, can be damn near impossible; during several weeks of play-testing, there were only two instances of stumbling on to people actually hanging out on the New York server, looking to frag. And the one time there were *three* players in the lobby—including this reviewer and a tech support guy who had come on-line to help iron out a wrinkle—the third player had to remark in astonishment, "This is the most people I've ever seen here!"

This dearth of available competition shouldn't be surprising, considering that DWANGO is designed for the hardcore gamer—who else would invest a not-inconsiderable amount of money to guarantee low-latency deathmatching?—and therefore targets a fairly narrow audience. In addition, DWANGO's various servers are not linked together (they may be in the future), so a player in the New York lobby cannot engage a player in the Dallas lobby without paying a long-distance surcharge. And, finally, since there's really nothing to do on the DWANGO server except frag or chat, people aren't motivated to hang out there waiting for a competitor to show up. (They're considering adding an e-mail function, or other goodies along those lines.)



The sound of one hand clapping

Come out here where I can, er, see you … yeah, that's the ticket

The other problem with DWANGO is less forgivable than a lack of subscribers. There's no reason to expect excessive hand-holding from a product aimed at hardcore gamers, who usually possess more than their fair share of technical know-how. But DWANGO is often impenetrably convoluted, for no good reason. Try to find the *Quake II* maps or the DOS DWANGO client on their site, for example, and you'll fail—they're simply not there. Call tech support, and they'll assure you that they *are* there. But challenge tech support to find them, and they'll fail. They'll then suggest you access DWANGO's FTP site to get your software. Time and time again nothing was where it was supposed to be; even when it was, there was no effort to direct users towards it; and e-mailed requests for help went consistently unanswered. To give credit where credit is due, the telephone tech support was excellent, thanks entirely to a guy named Matt—give him a raise!

A few glitches ain't no thang to practiced gamers, however, and once they've been ironed out, DWANGO does deliver an on-line experience straight out of a dream. But approach with caution! Since only the hardest of the hardcore are fragging here, anyone but the best will be positively pulped. Keeps you humble, at least … *–John Altman*

★★★½☆

DWANGO

www.dwango.com • Interactive Visual Systems Corporation • Requirements: Modem, a few DWANGO-compatible games • Multiplayer: Varies depending on game

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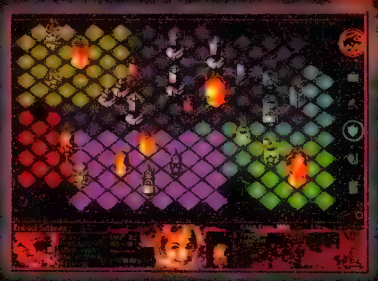

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Red Storm Entertainment

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3DO (Strategy)
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'JAGGED ALLIANCE II' features over 50 characters, each with unique speech, body, and attitude. Plan your strategy in turn-based mode, or play in fast and furious real time. Cut supply lines, call in air strikes, and maneuver vehicles in state-of-the-art tactical combat. Take on your friends via network, modem and internet play.

Sir Tech (Strategy)
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'MYTH II: SOULBLIGHTER' is the sequel to the hugely popular Myth: The Fallen Lords, & features an improved engine with animated 3-D models, 4x finer terrain mesh, & new lighting model. New special effects include 3-D fire, ambient life, & powerful new spells. Also includes improved pathfinding, AI, & new units & terrain. More net fun with individual & team rankings and in-game alliances.

Bungie (Strategy)
Release: 11/98
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'WAR GAMES' For the 1st time in a PC strategy game, the True 3-D engine eliminates "tiles" and allows the entire playfield to rotate. Real-time effects & military intelligence. Thirty campaigns in alpine, jungle, desert, lowlands, pacific ocean, and urban environments. Every unit, building, and environment is created in complete 3-D, creating battles so realistic, you'll swear you are there!

MGM (Strategy)
Release: NOW
PC CD
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'BALDUR'S GATE' is set in the Forgotten Realms campaign world. It features a transparent interface and gameplay that uses a real-time modification of the Advanced Dungeon & Dragons rules system. Over 60 monsters to fight; you control a party of six, each with unique abilities and personas. 5 CDs are filled with pre-rendered backgrounds, compelling music, and gameplay!

Interplay (Roleplaying)
Release: 11/98
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$44.99

'HERETIC II' This third-person action/adventure game based on the Quake II engine sets players on a quest through vast city & outdoor settings as they search for a cure to a deadly plague. Richly detailed environments, stunning special effects, & challenging level designs. Features a variety of offensive & defensive spells to fight a multitude of plague-ridden enemies.

Activision (Action)
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Interplay (Roleplaying)
Release: 9/98
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'GRIM FANDANGO' You control Manny Calavera, who as travel agent for the Department of the Dead brings people to the Land of the Dead. Characters come to life as folk-art style skeletons in this adventure story of embezzlement & redemption. Inspired by film noir & Mexican folklore, the game features wildly exaggerated hot rods, more than 50 mysterious characters, & 90 locations, all in stunning 3-D.

Lucas Arts (Adventure)
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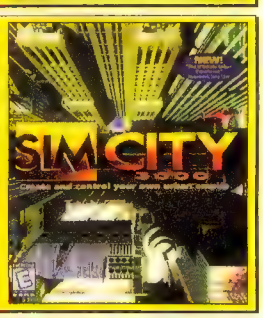

'SIMCITY 3000' Immerse yourself in a total 3D environment with hundreds of new buildings to choose from and sophisticated microsimulators allowing for detailed control over business and other facilities. Your city comes to life with bustling traffic, 3-D rendered buildings, & even SimCitizens. Tackle unexpected disasters & urban missions.

Maxis (Strategy)
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'FALCON 4.0' Pilot an F-16 in a real-time war in this multiplayer air combat simulation set in the Korean Peninsula. Superb 3-D photorealistic, AI, texture-mapped graphics and detailed models of F-16 avionics, weapons and threats. Play options include: Dogfight, Instant Action, Campaign Mode, & Tactical Engagement.

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'MAN OF WAR II' puts you in the real-time 3D role of Ship's Captain (issue crew orders, select shot types), Division Commander (order the formation & movement of ships in your squadron) or Fleet Admiral (plot strategy & control the entire fleet). Choose to play historical commanders or create your own persona as you carefully nurture your career.

Virgin (Simulation)
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'BASEBALL MOGUL 99' Be the General Manager & Manager of a real major league team. Set defense, batting order, & pitching rotation. Sign deals, make trades, even determine hot dog prices! Includes scouting & financial reports, news stories, and both play-by-play & box scores. Features city & league editors and head-to -head multiplayer capability.

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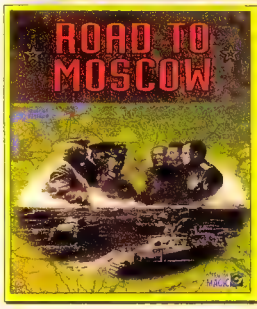

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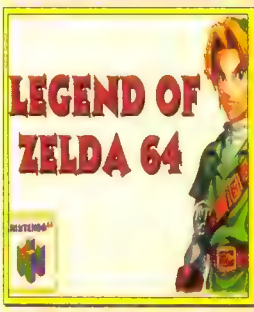

'LEGEND OF ZELDA' Link is back to explore new worlds & rescue Princess Zelda from the evil clutches of Gannondorf. Explore massive, mystical 3D worlds, gleaning information from natives & battling bosses. Make use of maps that are specific to each level & use the 3D attention button to circle your enemies or objects of interest.

$64.99

Nintendo (Roleplaying)
Release: 11/98
N64

'METAL GEAR SOLID' redefines the action/adventure genre on Playstation. It's a spy action thriller that involves covert activities, and tons of weapons & communications gear. The movie-like plot puts you right in the middle of friendship, betrayal, & even romance, as you attempt to accomplish your military mission.

$49.99

Konami (Shooter)
Release 10/98
PSX

Still Unreal

In response to your review of *Unreal* [*CGS+ 94*], I would like to thank you for showing me a screen shot of the Queen Alien (of who I haven't reached yet) and of the end cinematic. What a great surprise it will be now.

As for the article, what I see is a person who is so used to the typical shooter, he can't appreciate anything else. There were complaints about only pairs of enemies, weenie guns, and no adrenaline. It sounds like you need to go back to *Quake II*, where you can go on a mindless killing frenzy. Grab a huge gun, enter a room full of enemies and unload. *Unreal* goes further than the typical game. There are only pairs of enemies because if there were more, you wouldn't stand a chance [*actually, your machine wouldn't have a chance of pushing around that many polygonal characters –ed*]. The AI is far better than any other game on the market, and makes killing enemies hard enough with only one or two of them. As far as the cinematics, it doesn't need them. You said it yourself, the visuals are stunning.

One issue you didn't even touch on was the music. No other game has music that changes with the mood of the game. [*This has been a staple of many games since the original* Wing Commander *back in the early 90s. –ed*]

I'll have to agree with you on the multiplayer aspects of the game—they are poor. But I think that you need to take a better look at the single-player mode. I believe you will find that it is a *Quake* killer in that respect.

Philip S. Wyatt
Via Internet

We shouldn't have used the screen shots from late in the game. That was a mistake, and we apologize. –ed

Unreal typoe

In the *Unreal* review, Robert Mayer misspelled mahvelous. It's spelled marvelous.

Bob B.
Via Internet

For once, this was intentional. No, really. It's "mahvelous," as in Billy Crystal on Saturday Night Live *as Fernando saying, "Yoo look mahvelous…." It's an 80s flashback kind of thing… –ed*

Dragons still flaming

In reply to "King Bahamut's" letter to the editor [*CGS+ 94*], I would just like to throw in my four cents. First I'd like to say that these "Dragons" are a pathetic attempt at a gaming union. They think they run the company, and if they don't get their way they will "strike," or in this case, not buy the product. These people spend way to much time obsessing over tiny details in games when they could be whining and moaning about more important issues. Anybody who thinks they *should* have say in a company and when they don't threaten a company with a childish boycott is crazy.

This reminds me of what happened to *Quake TeamFortress*—obsessed fans whined and moaned so much after changes to the game that the entire team ceased all additions to the game, hence ruining the experience for everyone. The makers of these games are under no obligation to continue their work—if they don't like your idea, tough. You'll live.

Just don't threaten a company just cause they don't share your childish Dragon views.

Sune Firehair
Via Internet

Final Fantasy I (star)

I think you were overly generous in giving *Final Fantasy VII* four stars [*CGS+ 95*]. I think the game is great, but it doesn't work. What good is a game that doesn't work?

It had great graphics, a great story, and great gameplay, but what good is all that when it doesn't work? Eidos tech support is worthless. (I just spent half and hour waiting on the phone.) They say "sorry we are experiencing very high call volume." Gee, maybe you wouldn't have that problem if your games worked.

Personally I would have given this game one star.

Charles Neikirk
Via Internet

That was an incredibly difficult review. There were two issues: first, the game does *work perfectly for many people, and second, once it's up and running, we experienced no additional problems (which you apparently didn't either). The actual problem with the game is a compatibility issue, not a program bug, and while the distinction is ultimately irrelevant to most people, it's somehow more forgivable in these days of complex operating systems and hardware configurations. –ed*

We, Robot

I just read through the September issue, and I thought it was great, but I have a question. I used to love Lego (and still do), and when I read about the *Robotics Invention System* [*Road to Nowhere, CGS+ 94*], I was really excited. But you really complained a lot about how hard it was to put it together, do you think that somebody who is extremely determined could put it together? Are the instructions adequate? How much does it cost?

Yoni Kurland
Via Internet

It isn't nearly as difficult as we made it out to be. The main reason we were befuddled is that we had one weekend to create this machine that would represent the magazine in a race run at a trade show which included about 40,000 of our peers in the industry. Someone with time, and perhaps some interest in engineering and/or Lego, should have little problem creating some pretty amazing devices.

We also didn't have final documentation (come to think of it, we didn't have any *documentation), so we can't comment on that aspect of the program, but the system will cost around $200. –ed*

Shrinking issue

I've had a subscription of your magazine for a while and recently I've been a bit disappointed by the content of the magazine. There isn't as much as there used to be. However I enjoy the quality of the articles and especially the humor.

Andrew Howes
Via Internet

The "incredible shrinking issue" is a yearly phenomenon that strikes every magazine. The summer is a wasteland—there are fewer games to review and no one wants to show their end-of-year stuff for preview coverage. –ed

Incoherent rant of the month

I HATE YOUR CRAP MAGAZINE. NOW I KNOW WHY IT IS SO CHEAP TO SUBSCRIBE, WHENEVER I GET ONE OF YOUR CRAP MAGAZINES, I BURN IT!

TAKE SOME SERIOUS NOTES AND LEARN HOW TO WRITE A DECENT MAG, YOU ARE CRAP!!! YOU'RE REVIEWS ARE A BUNCH OF NEGATIVE CRAP, GET YOURSELVES SORTED OUT AND STOP WRITING CRAP!

Paul Buisseret
Apparently from Prison

Can't you at least be original? This is just like that other rant. Boring….

Maybe when we're done getting ourselves "sorted out," we'll have time to write lovely letters like this one and send them to our favorite magazines. –ed

WE'RE LISTENING

Send all correspondence to editor@cdmag.com

Letters may be edited for space considerations.

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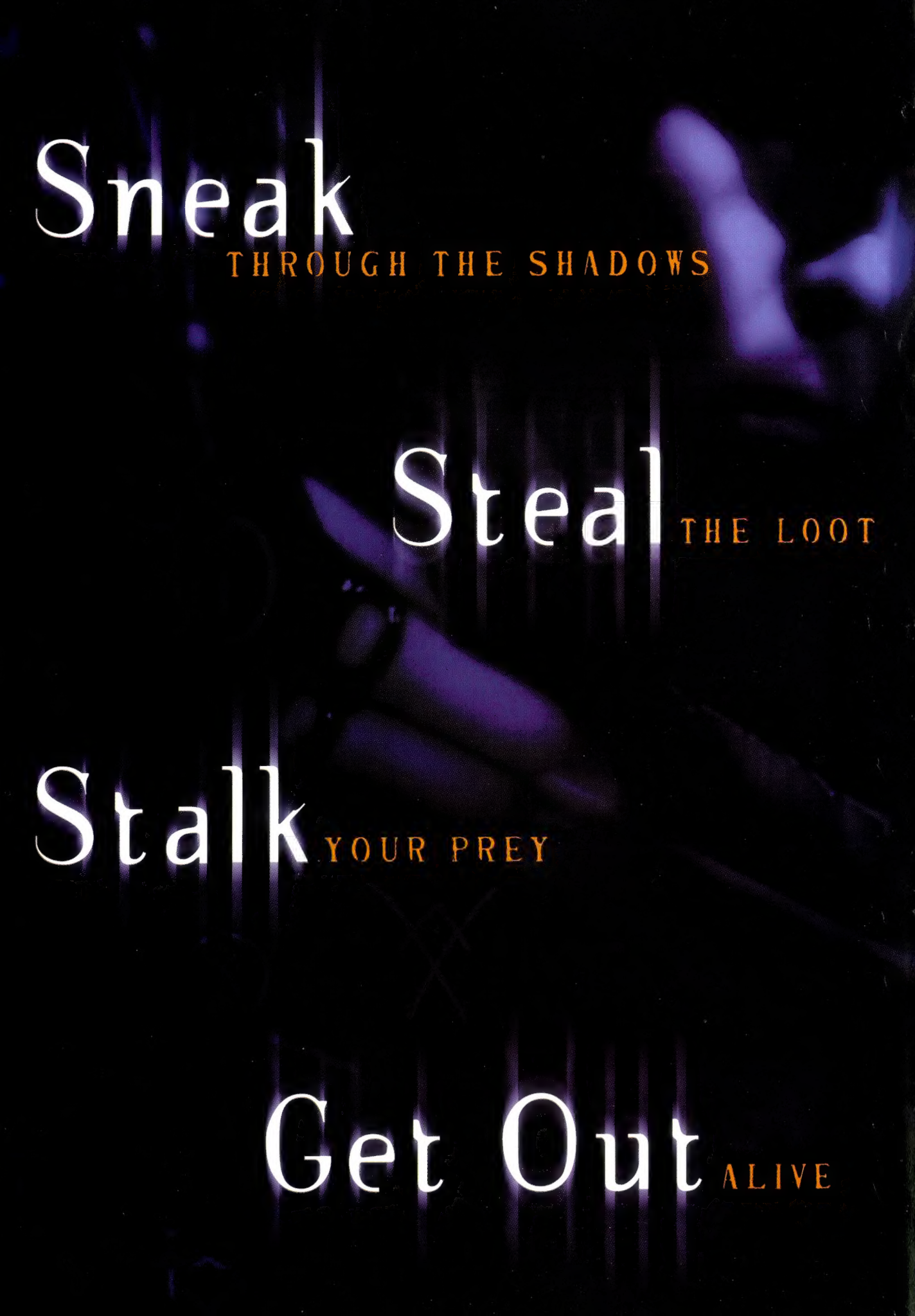
Sneak
THROUGH THE SHADOWS
Steal
THE LOOT
Stalk
YOUR PREY
Get Out
ALIVE

n a dark and dangerous world,
your best weapon isn't a rocket launcher,
but your mind.

You'll need all of your stealth and cunning to sneak in,
steal your prize and make it out alive.

But if a patch of light,
or loud footstep gives you away,
a well placed arrow comes in handy.

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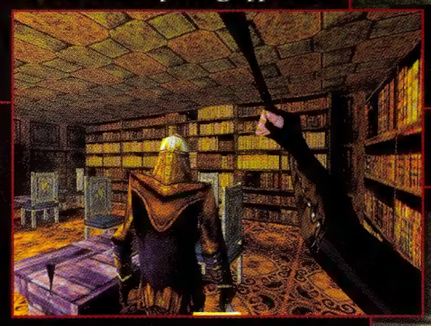
THIEF

THE DARK PROJECT

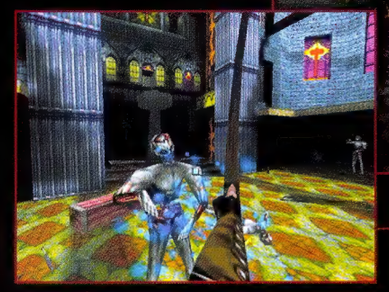
Track your prey through the shadows of a sleeping city.

Quietly use your blackjack to take out unsuspecting opponents.



When all else fails, it's time for some swordplay.

Cause some mayhem with your fire arrows.



Use a holy water arrow to keep the undead off your back.

TEEN T AGES 13+ CONTENT RATED BY ESRB

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